FIVE ON PARADE

BY DORIS PEEL

6-E-8

$2.00

FIVE ON PARADE

By Doris Peel

THE Kipling family may look sad and childish to you when you see them first — for they are poor and orphans, and Robin, the eldest, is only fifteen. But very soon you see that they are not pathetic, but extraordinarily lucky, for they are all brave and fond of each other and all incurable dreamers. You cannot read far without loving sturdy Robin, exquisite Mimsy, poetic Ricky, gallant Poppett, and round little Boots. They live in a childish and beautiful world of their own, far away from reality.

They grow up in their dingy basement, sensitive, beauty-loving, shockingly frank, talented, and loyal. They alternately attract and exasperate every one. How each in his own way comes up against reality and has to fight with it alone, and wins, not by abandoning either romanticism or family affection, but by reshaping both, is a story utterly charming, delicate, yet spirited. It carries the Kiplings through childhood, adolescence, and early maturity. When they grow up, Robin runs a tea shop, Ricky is a successful poet, Mimsy is taken up by the rich, Poppett is a brilliant actress, and Boots is a fighter for lost causes. Their reactions to new and different environments are beautifully handled.

Five on Parade

DORIS PEEL

REFERENCE LIBRARY * HOUGHTON MIFFLIN CO. * BOSTON, MASS.
Archive Collection
This book may not leave the Offices and if borrowed must be returned within 7 days

FIVE ON PARADE

BY
DORIS PEEL

BOSTON AND NEW YORK
HOUGHTON MIFFLIN COMPANY
The Riverside Press Cambridge
1930

COPYRIGHT, 1930, BY DORIS PEEL

ALL RIGHTS RESERVED INCLUDING THE RIGHT TO REPRODUCE
THIS BOOK OR PARTS THEREOF IN ANY FORM

The Riverside Press
CAMBRIDGE · MASSACHUSETTS
PRINTED IN THE U.S.A.

TO

MY BROTHER

ROBERT PEEL

CONTENTS

PART ONE

TIME OF SUN AND RAIN 1

PART TWO

TIME OF MISTS AND STARS 81

PART THREE

TIME OF WINDS 137

PART ONE

TIME OF SUN AND RAIN

FIVE ON PARADE

⁂

PART ONE

TIME OF SUN AND RAIN

I

ROBIN lifted her chin jauntily. Mad, was it! The Old Lady had called it that — although, under all the noise she had made, she was probably somewhat relieved at their going. 'Well, if you're bound to, you're bound to, and nobody can blame me. But take my word, miss, you'll be traipsing back for help soon enough!' Traipsing back! Oh, *would* they! A fat lot she knew about the Kiplings! Suppose it was mad. Very well, then — they would be mad! They weren't scared. She said that under her breath, as she had said it a hundred times before during these last two days: 'We're not scared!' Of course not! *Of course not!* She marched between the pointed gates of the park, her eyes like blue fire in the whiteness of her face.

Overhead the sky was massed with clouds, purplish-colored, swollen, shifting into one another rapidly. A blade of lightning slit through them. There was a hush; then, off in the distance, a muffled beat on the drums of the sky...

Every one was beginning to run for shelter: shoppers, loiterers, the mild old men who seemed to drowse on the benches from daybreak to dusk — they were all scurrying down the paths now, under the creaking trees. But Robin remained unaware of them, unaware of the storm charging over the city, until the rain itself came — slowly at first, like beads slipping off a string, denting the flat pond and patterning it with ripples; then faster, faster, in great drives of wind, until the trees swayed and crashed, and the grass clung shivering to the earth, and all the buildings looming up about the Park were pale and ethereal, like towers of mist.

She began to run then, swiftly, the saucepans clutched under her arms, and her hair flying in the wind.

The Kiplings came to a halt in the middle of the pavement, crimson with heat, and all bulging rather grotesquely because they were wearing as many clothes as it was humanly possible to get on.

'This is it!' Ricky announced; and while Mimsy sat down on the carpet-bag, and Boots and Poppet squatted wearily on the curb, he leaned against the railing and examined the corner house, his eyes, deep-set and cryptic, kindling with sudden interest.

It was the last of a long row of joined-together buildings, all very much the same, all equally reserved and nondescript. It had a large fat window swelling out from each floor, and five stone steps marching up to the front doorway; and a little to one side of them it had three other steps, narrow and steep, leading down to a basement entrance. Once, quite a long time ago, it had been a rather important house on a rather important avenue, so that even now there was a certain dignity in its brownstone bulk, an elusive (and delusive) atmosphere of gentility. It was graceless and staid, but appeared as firm as Gibraltar; erstwhile traditions and elegancies might have rotted away within, an old order passed and another taken its place, but it stood stolidly and stubbornly against the wind of the years, like a blunt monument to something that no longer mattered...

Ricky swung himself gently on the railing, trying to make some sort of pattern from his thoughts about the house. He loved to muse like this, to half-close his eyes and retreat into the innermost part of himself — that secret and strangely restless self where the words were floating, thousands of them, like birds in a mist: words that, if he could only find them, only put them together as they ought to be put, could be fitted to all the things that he felt — explaining them, and making them beautiful. Now and then, in rare moments, he was able to do this, and a wave of excitement would sweep through Ricky, until he felt like the god of the earth and the lord of the sky. 'I have it — I have it!' And then he would grow humble again, and reach out his hands for more...

Mimsy sat motionless on the carpet-bag, her chin cupped in her palms. Through the deepening dusk her face was pale, with small, delicate lips held closely together, and eyes that were both candid and reticent — like the eyes of very small children. At fourteen, in spite of stem-thin legs and narrow shoulders, Mimsy was possessed of a fine and exquisite grace. Robin had become aware of it a long time ago, all in a moment, with a sort of lovely shock, as she so often became aware of the beauty of familiar things. And once Ricky had made up a piece about it, writing with breathless absorption in the back of his history-book: 'Mimsy walks gently, as if she was stepping on birds' wings — it is almost like dancing — only quieter and stiller.' (And when he had finished that, he was very cocky and hilarious, so that everybody knew he must have done something!)

There was a mutter of thunder above the old houses; and Poppet, black-eyed and tousle-haired, leaned forward and wept a bit into the several collars buttoned under her chin.

Boots was extremely shocked: 'You aren't *crying*, are you?'

'Of course not!' Poppet retorted snappily. 'Can't I blow my nose if I want to!' And she proceeded to blow it, with great gusto...

Then the front door of the corner house opened with a sudden whir and wheeze, and the largest lady the Kiplings had ever seen sailed majestically out onto the landing. She had crimped, violently gold hair, and a neck composed almost entirely of chins; her eyes, small and pale, were set between ridges of flesh, and the corners of her wide mouth sank deeply into flaccid cheeks. There was something extravagantly obese about her, something so grotesque that, at first glance, she might have been a Fat Woman who had strayed out of a circus. But, looking closer, there was a sapient tilt to the mouth, a shrewdness in the pale eyes — and, beyond the shrewdness, like a buried secret, something a little bitter and a little weary.

The Kiplings stared up, frankly intrigued; and she stared down over a tremendous bosom and a tremendous cascade of lace.

'My golly!' said the large lady in a rich and astonishingly beautiful voice. 'Who are you?'

They hesitated for a moment, and in that moment they seemed to draw together, to become unified, to screen themselves swiftly with reticence. Then: 'We're the Kiplings,' Ricky announced.

'But how did you get here?'

'We walked.'

'All the way?' she demanded, evidently impressed.

Mimsy explained: 'Robin gave us car-fare — but we bought a cake instead.'

'A chocolate one,' added Poppet.

'To celebrate,' concluded Boots.

The large lady clutched up two handfuls of her crackling taffeta skirt and came plopping down the steps, one foot at a time. 'I'm Mrs. McMasters,' she boomed, with a sort of curt affability. 'Alfecia McMasters. Where's your sister?'

'She's coming with the saucepans.'

'You got off all right?'

'Down the back stairs,' Poppet reported vivaciously. 'Robin visited the Old Lady in the parlor and shut the door. And we ran!'

'Ha!' said Mrs. McMasters with a snort of amusement. 'I like your sister; she's got guts — I can't stand people who haven't got guts! That's why I've let you come. And if you don't behave yourselves — out you'll go! What are you loafing here for?'

'We're not loafing,' they retorted, slightly nettled. 'We're waiting for Robin.'

'Well, that's no help. Get inside and clear up your stuff ——'

'We *always* wait for Robin!' they insisted, threatening sparks in their eyes.

A sudden blast of thunder split through the heavy air...

'My God!' trumpeted Mrs. McMasters, poking fat fingers into her ears. 'What a row! Get inside, all of you, and when you're ready come up to my place and get your supper.'

Mimsy hurriedly declined for the family: 'Thank you — but we have our cake.'

'All right. I don't care, it doesn't make any difference to me! There's a bottle of milk in the sink, and bang on the waterpipe in the bathroom if you need help. Now, go on ——' She shoved them brusquely down the three steps, and then went plopping up again to her own front entrance.

The Kiplings and their baggage landed in a muddled heap on the cement floor of a dark little hall. 'Don't look — don't look!' Boots warned in an urgent voice. 'The door's open at the back!' And they all turned away quickly so that they shouldn't catch sight of the basement rooms before Robin arrived.

In front of them the street was stitched with silver rain, and in half a dozen moments there was a densely woven fabric of it, swaying and swushing back and forth with the wind. The road became polished, like black marble; the cars were strange animals slithering past; there was the blare of horns, the boom of thunder, the occasional thin clatter of hoofs...

They stood quite still, all their words dried up in a flame of excitement. And then Poppet began to prance about on the tips of her toes: 'Here she comes — here she comes!' and they crowded to the doorway to look.

Down the street, through the twilight, Robin came running, her face wet with rain and half-luminous against the dark blur of houses.

'Forward!' chanted the Kiplings in unison.

She couldn't wave, because her arms were full of bundles, but they knew that she had heard them. A Kipling always heard that chant: it was a sign, a signal; it flashed out clear and sharp wherever they were — *Forward!*

She rushed down the three steps and into the shadowy hall. 'Here, quick! somebody take the Swag — he's falling out of his paper!'

'What happened?' they demanded in a chorus.

Robin shook herself, and clicked her heels together. 'A rumpus!' she remarked briefly.

'Go on!' they encouraged, anxious for details.

She paused for a moment, silhouetted against the half-light of the street — an erect, spirited figure with close-cropped hair and lifted chin. 'The Old Lady said we couldn't do it and I said we were *going* to do it! And she said the Duke had left us in her care, and I said he'd left us in our own care!'

'Sure!' the others confirmed.

'And she said that I didn't know anything, and I said that nobody could live seventeen years and not know anything!'

This was so obvious that they didn't even trouble themselves to agree with it.

'So I paid the rent and left,' Robin concluded briskly. 'And that's the end of that!' She turned to the small door at the back of the hall, and flung it wide open with a dramatic flourish: 'Come on, everybody — here we are!'

And slowly, expectantly, they followed her inside...

The first room was bare and desolate: a high, narrow window smeared with rain, plaster walls crumbling near the ceiling, the chill pallor of a wet dusk draining everything of color and warmth. They walked through it without saying a word, into the next room and the two beyond that; then back again, still silent, to where the furniture was massed in dim confusion. From the street came a dull, slurring sound. It filled their ears; it seemed to enter into and become a part of themselves: wush-wush-wush, a dreary rhythm from which there was no escape.

They stood together, motionless; and a sharp flare of lightning threw their faces into sudden relief against the shadows.

It lit them up with a queer, brief radiance, half silver and half blue...

Mimsy was shaken with a pang of fear. This was where they were going to live, hidden away under the big house, terribly apart from everyone and everything. 'It's very — nice,' she said, but her voice gave in with an odd little gulp — and the Kiplings were suddenly alarmed at what it betrayed.

'Come on,' Robin urged noisily. 'Come on! Let's do something — let's hang up the Swag.' And the others stood about her, solemn and silent, while she unwrapped one of the parcels, ripping off the string and tearing away the flabby paper.

Inside was a face carved from wood: old and battered, with leering lips and narrow, taunting eyes. It was the Swag — one of the numerous things that the Kiplings, from time to time, had taken into their lives and endowed with a significance too intimate and too subtle to be explained to other people. None of them could remember where it had come from, or when it had first appeared; but Ricky, years ago, had fashioned a simple and satisfying origin out of his head: 'Michael,' said God, 'you take this to the Duke of Monmouth's family. Tell them if they're scared it'll laugh at them, but if they're not scared they can laugh at it! Go, and I will be with thee!' Ricky had seen Michael and had chatted with him for quite a while. Then he had gone back to God. Where? Oh, along the stars, first those at the edge of the sky, then the higher ones. He had explained about it: you ran up them like steps, up and up. It was a beautiful way!

And ever since then the Swag had been with them, hanging on the walls of cheap side-street hotels and of boarding-houses that smelt of cabbages and failures...

Robin banged it on a nail near the window. 'There you are! And may you be miserable unto the depths of hell!'

'And may you be miserable unto the depths of hell!' Boots and Poppet chanted gravely.

(Once they had had quite a ceremony when the Swag was hung up in a new place, with marching songs and strong oaths and a great deal of bowing and elaborate praying — but now it had been reduced to one line.)

Mimsy tipped her head a little, and stared up through the window. 'You can't see much,' she said in a small, forlorn voice. 'You can't even see the sky!'

It seemed suddenly dreadful to the Kiplings that they couldn't see the sky. No sun, no moon or stars, no lovely fleets of clouds! They would have to live without them here, for they were locked in the earth, below all beauty...

'When I was in bed,' Poppet remembered, 'the moon used to shine on me. I'd hold my hands out, and they'd be white — just like silver.'

'And you could make shadows on the wall,' Boots elaborated mournfully. 'Rabbits, and castles ——'

'Oh!' Robin interrupted. 'Look!'

They all turned to the window; and there, shining through the rain, they found a lovely little light — primrose-colored, caught in a globular lamp. They stared at it for a moment, their faces pale and delicately etched on the growing darkness; then Ricky said softly: 'It's — Our Moon!'

'Oh, of course!' Robin echoed. 'Of course!'

But Poppet sat down with a bounce on the edge of a mattress, and dug her chin against her knees. 'I'm sorry,' she muttered, 'I'm terribly sorry — but I think I'm going to cry!'

Boots turned very red and very hot. 'So am I!' he announced in a loud, gruff voice.

Robin flattened her hands against the wall. 'No — no!' she pleaded. 'It will be all right in a little while, honest it will!'

They were silent, but something in the room was collapsing; she could feel it going, bit by bit; soon, in a moment perhaps, it would be broken down entirely. She hesitated, then jerked out her chin with an old defiant gesture. 'Forward!' the order was flung to Boots and Poppet, but Mimsy and Ricky, sensing the urgency of the situation, fumbled their way after them through the cluttered furniture.

Robin slammed the door, then rummaged among the parcels in the corner for a tin plate and a large wooden spoon. 'Here!' she handed them to Poppet. 'You stand at the back. Now, then ——'

Under a hood of shadows the two youngest Kiplings were perfectly still. They had done this over and over again; they knew just what was coming, every word, every intonation, and yet they became tense and expectant — as if on the verge of a tremendous adventure...

Robin began to whisper something: 'We are in the Parade, all of us — this very moment we are in the Parade!'

They were quiet, breathless, waiting for the old signal.

Then her voice suddenly swelled out vibrantly, and her arm went up as if she were raising a sword: 'Listen! The Valkyries are galloping forward; Boadicea is charging in her chariot, her hair is flying in the wind and she is hurling defiance at the Romans; Cœur de Lion is marching before the Crusaders — thousands and thousands of them, with shining swords and great banners; Elizabeth is riding with her court, and Marie Antoinette is riding to the guillotine — the tumbril is lurching and her hands are strapped behind her, but she is fearless and proud; Joan is on a white horse thundering into battle before the armies of France; the Black Prince is advancing at Crécy — and the others are coming, fast as the wind: Nelson and Henry of Navarre, My Lord Howard and the Light Brigade ——'

She paused for a moment, and then: 'Listen!' Robin commanded. 'There are drums and trumpets and clashing swords; there are crimson and purple banners waving, and burnished shields, and halberts gleaming in the sun, and plumed helmets, and standards rolling out against the sky! There are warriors crying and horses' hoofs pounding — and they are all going forward — going forward!'

Boots and Poppet shivered with excitement, as if the Parade were thundering at their side...

Then Robin's voice flared out again: 'We are in it now — we are part of it! Beat your drum, Poppet!' She flung open the door as if it were a gate leading into a kingdom; and Poppet, with all the strength in her arm, brought down the wooden spoon.

So, in this manner, to the sound of a beaten tin plate, the Kiplings marched into their basement!

2

The Duke had told them about it ever so many times, and always in a voice properly freighted with significance:

'When I was very young, quite negligible in fact — about ten minutes as I remember it — somebody packed me into a market-basket and left me on the doorstep of an orphanage. I dare say I was a bit worried! After all, it *was* unusual — when one has taken the trouble to arrive, one does expect a little something in the way of a reception. But there I was, plumped down in front of a strange door, with nothing but my youth and beauty to pull me through! Anybody would have felt uneasy — even you, my dear Robina. Then after a while a Stout Person with Ear-Rings came chugging up the steps and tripped over me; and being, naturally, in a rather nervous condition, I began to holler. Not that I was frightened, you understand — simply uneasy!

'So the Stout Person with Ear-Rings took me inside, and every one began to hunt for Clues. That's what they always go after, first thing, when they run across people like me. Usually, of course, they rely on notes, such as: "This is my precious infant from whom an unkind fate must part me — care for him, and may Heaven bless you — Amen!" and then a row of tear-blots and a postscript telling what kind of food agrees with him best. But I didn't have a note, or even a card. And then, in most cases, there are clothes to fall back on — but I didn't have any clothes either. Only a blanket, quite an ordinary one, and a sheet of Tuesday's newspaper under that. It *was* a bit unusual, you can see that for yourselves! Because if my people had been everyday people, they would certainly have dressed me up before they sent me calling ——'

'Of course!' the little Kiplings would chorus breathlessly.

'Ah, but I *wasn't* dressed up — and that's the whole point. Now I'll tell you what it may mean: it may mean that they had something tremendous to conceal!' Here he would pause, and then go on once more in a very low and confidential voice: 'Perhaps all my little shirts and pants and thingamajigs were embroidered with coronets or the family coat-of-arms, and of course they would never have been able to use those, because everything would have been betrayed at once. So — the blanket and Tuesday's newspaper! It was really quite a clever move, you see!'

They would see perfectly. It was an enormously clever move!

'And since no one had the slightest idea who I was, they very kindly decided to give me a name: Matthew Kipling — Matthew out of the Bible, and Kipling out of their heads. But of course that counts for nothing at all, and' — here he would wave an arm nonchalantly — 'as far as we know, or anybody else knows, I may be the Duke of Monmouth!'

The Kiplings were always deeply stirred at this. For a time they had it a little confused and thought that he definitely *was* the Duke of Monmouth; but afterwards they understood that there was a slight haze of uncertainty surrounding the matter. Nevertheless, it was a very cheering and exhilarating idea to cling to — especially when they had to wear outgrown clothes to the point of bursting, and were faced with irate landladies on the war-path for their rent!

Then came the momentous evening when the Duke, spurred into sudden revolt, crawled through a window of the orphanage with his clothes under one arm and a leg of mutton under the other, and ran from twilight to dawn without knowing where he was bound for — and spent the next morning crouched under a hawthorn hedge with pink and cream petals dripping over his face, and tore off again in the afternoon, following the river that led to London, and living on cold mutton for days and days and days...

The story would roll out steadily, link after glittering link, until the whole chain of adventures was forged for them in words:

There was the time he lived with Old Harry the junkman, who had a bootful of gold pieces under his bed and a choice repertoire of ballads about highwaymen in cocked hats and delicate maidens who languished, Elaine-like, to picturesque ends; and the time he stowed himself on a merchant ship and was carried halfway round the world and back, with a headful of glamorous memories; and another time when somebody took a Benevolent Interest in him, and almost strangled his spirit in a net of good intentions: 'Matthew,' she said, 'my heart aches for you, poor boy, poor boy! How you must long for a home and care and all the little things you've never had! We will look about for a nice school; and find some proper work for your week-ends; and you can attend to the fires in the winter, and the garden in the summer...' Matthew had hesitated for half a day; then he had bolted!

And after that came the circus he joined — because he had fallen desperately in love with the spangled lady who stood up against a board while her husband threw knives at her; and the church choir he sang in for a month or two, feeling very holy and uplifted; and the great stage of the Opera House where he rushed and marched about, in gorgeous costume, before vast, dim mountains of people, and listened to voices, so beautiful, so thrilling, that he wept night after night and had prickles up and down his back!

They were glowing, chaotic years, with neither rhyme nor reason, and the Duke, with his chair tilted perilously against the wall, would talk dashingly, and a trifle inaccurately, about them, while the Kiplings hung on his words, and roared and gasped and grew scarlet with delight...

But the next part of the story was the best of all, the gay and romantic part about the coming of the Duchess of Monmouth. It was in April that the Duke first saw her. She was leaning out of a tenement window, drying her hair — long golden hair like Mimsy's, the color of buttercups, as gleaming and soft as a streamer of silk.

Below her, in the court to which the Duke had casually wandered, everything was noisy and squalid. Two agitated ladies, with purple-tinted noses and voices like cats, were thrusting their heads forward and flinging blood-curdling threats at one another; and the door of the corner pub was creaking back and forth, letting out a sour, sickly smell; and a barrel-organ man was trudging up the alley with a swarm of excited children about him. 'Aow, ply it!' they were imploring. 'Ply the moosic!' And then another man came clattering into the court, chasing a little boy who had stolen a sugared bun. He caught him near the mouth of the alley and lifted him straight up by the hairs of his head, so that, for a moment or two, the little boy hung between heaven and earth, looking rather blank. Then, ''Elp!' he roared. ''*Elp!*' and immediately, as if they had been stationed behind doors and ash-cans waiting for the signal to advance, a small army of women sprang forth and charged the baker with howls of righteous indignation. And the two purple-nosed ladies, finding language inadequate to express their deep distaste for each other, began a brisk round of clawing; and the barrel-organ man began to play; and the children began to dance in the gutter, holding their rags out, fanlike, as if they were party frocks...

And above all the clamor and confusion, the girl leaned out of the tenement window, her golden hair radiant in a pale sweep of sunshine, her face tilted up to the April sky.

The Duke came back the next afternoon with a sixpenny bunch of early violets, and after that he kept on coming back with an air of great determination. For a little while the girl was struck more or less dumb with excitement, having rashly rushed to the conclusion that he was somebody very special — probably a lord in disguise; but when he had convinced her, regretfully, that, although this was possible, it wasn't at present an established fact, she stopped being awed and became sociable—which was much more pleasant for every one concerned.

She invited him to accompany her to the fried-fish shop beyond the corner pub; and in return for this favor he took her to a picture show (which he had inspected beforehand so as to be able to talk grandiloquently about it) and she was tremendously impressed, and admired all the wrong things in a solemn whisper; and he took her to Madam Tussaud's, and she was so entranced that he had some difficulty in persuading her to leave; and he took her to the palace gates to see the Queen drive forth, and she shouted ''Ooray! 'Ooray!' at the top of her lungs, and wept with patriotic emotion. And after that they went to Hampstead Heath and he read a lot of poems to her, Mr. Shakespeare's and Mr. Tennyson's and a number of his own, and she sat very still, listening obediently, while bits of sunshine and little leaf-shadows danced over her golden hair.

'I am going to be a poet,' he told her. 'Or an opera singer. I haven't decided which.' All about him there were bright, untrodden paths...

Then they got married. It was June — you could feel that it was June, even in the gloomiest corner of the squalid court. The Duke wore a sprig of geranium that he had plucked from a flower-bed in the nearest park, and the girl wore an overpowering sort of hat with a tremendous scarlet feather; and they had their wedding banquet in an A B C shop, with a bus-ride afterwards for a honeymoon. It rained, and somebody strolled off with their carpet-bag, and they lost their umbrella and dropped their sweets, and the beautiful scarlet feather uncurled itself mournfully and fell dead on the brim of the hat...

But the Duke and Duchess of Monmouth went riding through London, gayly, radiantly, as if the world were theirs!

Following that there was a rather haphazard period when a full meal shone out as a glamorous adventure. Having pawned or sold all surplus possessions, and pooled the profits thereof, they bought a second-hand hurdy-gurdy and wandered about the streets of the city, singing Old Harry's ballads, and garbled versions of the Opera House arias, and other songs, very smart and spirited, that they made up themselves. The girl got a bit thin as the months went on, and now and then, when her merriment faded, her eyes held a grave look, a rather old look; and the Duke, smitten with remorse for his general inadequacy, would rush out with every penny they possessed and buy two dozen eggs (which invariably went bad before they could finish them) and currant jelly (which she didn't like) and would plunge about her in fond and agitated circles, until, with her quick laughter, she managed to shove him back into a state of jaunty confidence.

'Some day we'll be famous,' he promised. 'All our children will have golden prams, and you'll have a green velvet dress...'

A green velvet dress was the girl's dearest wish. As far back as she could remember she had always wanted it. Green velvet, beautiful and gracious, with a train at her feet like an emerald pool...

Then the hurdy-gurdy collapsed into a ruin of raucous grunts, and the Duke became a hotel doorman in a handsome outfit, and ushered lords and ladies through the entrance in a most dashing and dramatic fashion; and the girl shut herself up in the bathroom and cut off all her golden hair, so that the first baby should have enough clothes. And several years after that, the Duke (quite by mistake) became involved in something surprisingly successful.

'The golden era!' he called it — when Robin and Ricky and Mimsy were in the world, and Poppet was on her way. It was then that the Money-in-the-Bank had its birth. It wasn't very impressive, as bank accounts go, but it was comforting to refer to mentally in periods of stress, and it made a rather nice background for certain colorful and fantastic plans that they were all in the habit of weaving. They never touched it, even when they were hungry; and they never let on about its existence to other people, especially not to landladies. The Duke, with a queer obstinacy — and a flash of belated wisdom — was unswerving on that point. He called it his Self-Esteem...

The next part of the story belonged, finally and tragically, to the girl with the golden hair; and the little Kiplings would listen to it without making a movement, without making a sound:

It was in the spring, in April again, that the fire broke out — a sudden flaring fire that whirled through the flimsy building like a scarlet wind. The girl, coming home from her shopping, saw it a long way off, and rushed down the street and into the house, beating her way through the clouds of smoke, up and up, to the room where the Kiplings were playing. She wrapped them in wet towels, laughing and chattering, while the engines and people gathered below, and sent them running along the corridor — Boots in Robin's arms, Ricky and Mimsy and Poppet linked closely together. Then a red knife fell, cutting off her passage, and the girl was left alone in the room...

After a perilous journey down halls and stairways, the Kiplings stumbled into the street, blinded and bewildered by smoke; and the flames grew savage behind them, and the air grew bitter with the fumes of ruin.

Then, far up in the burning house, the girl stood out clearly against a window. '*Oh!*' the people said, and their voices made a long, shuddering sound, a sound like the moaning of the sea. She stared — stared — her hands pressed to her heart, and her golden hair lit up about her head like a strange, fiery halo. Then her eyes fell on the children — all of them down there, all of them safe!

'Mumma!' the Kiplings shrieked in an agony of terror; and Ricky stamped and struggled and bit people, because they wouldn't let him go back to her rescue: 'I'm coming, Mumma, I'm coming ——' But he was caught in relentless arms.

And then the girl did a wonderful thing. Far up in that turmoil of smoke and flame she threw her arm high and waved to them — lovingly, reassuringly — her head held proudly back, as if saying that all was well. And even as she waved, something crashed in...

When the Duke came to that, Robin would be filled with such exquisite pain that her heart seemed to break in half. 'I can't bear it! I can't bear it!' she would cry to herself; but she could bear it, because the pain wasn't harsh now, it was made beautiful with a sort of ecstasy of pride and love. There was nothing trivially pathetic about the girl in the window; it was a glorious, a valiant picture — like Boadicea charging or Joan riding into battle. You cheered and felt lifted on wings of triumph, even if your heart did seem to break; and the thunder of the Parade came very near, then, all going forward!

Next followed the Dark Ages: two years that stood out sharply and bleakly in the Kiplings' lives, because they were so different from anything that had gone before or anything that came after. The Duke, dazed with pain and despair, could fumble his way to only one point: he took them all to an orphans' home, and they all cried bitterly when they said good-bye, for they thought the end of the world had come...

Their names were put down in a big book in strange, stilted letters: Robina, Richard, Margaret, Pauline, and Barret; and they had meals regularly, and baths regularly, and were urged to play sensible games. All the careless gayety that once had been theirs seemed lost forever; and for the first time they heard fragmentary whispers, secrets, that shocked and bewildered them:

'Robbie — it isn't true, is it, Robbie?'

'Of course not!' said Robin fiercely. 'Who told you that?'

'The big boy — the one in the jersey.'

She went over to the big boy and faced him with blazing eyes. 'You — you' — the words were ground out between her teeth — 'you *pig!* If you speak to my brother again, I'll kill you — d'you 'ear! I'll kill you!' And then she ran off and hid underneath a bench, and sobbed and sobbed, because it might be true after all...

Now and then they became desperate and took flight, singly and collectively, in a mad effort to reach the Duke, a thousand miles away; but they were always brought back again — taking their punishments with defiance and weeping with disappointment under their pillows at night. And further to blacken their reputations they told a great many lies, long, rather charming ones, about things they had seen and heard; and they had a fanciful idea that the schoolroom was a sort of open forum where they were entitled to voice protests and demand proofs, and to offer opinions and suggestions of their own.

The Important People found them extremely disconcerting: 'Those awful little savages!' they said. 'Without any sense of respect, or any sense of honor...' They had grim interviews, and pathetic interviews, and harsh, bombastic interviews, with every one involved getting very much upset. But the Kiplings seemed to be endowed with an unlimited capacity for doing the wrong thing.

There was the time Robin and Ricky scrambled up the fire-escape and danced on the moonlit roof. Snow had fallen that dusk, and everything about them looked strange and lovely — the white playground far below, with a white tree springing from its center, and thousands and thousands of silver housetops jutting towards the sky. Their feet twinkled in and out of the dazzling stuff, their nightgowns swung in the wind as they moved.

'Look, Ricky! I'm a bird — I'm a bird ——'

They were both birds, flying in the moonlight. To the very edge of the roof they went, purged of all fear; then back again to the chimney-stacks, fluttering their arms and laughing aloud. The beauty of the night excited and confused them. They wanted to do tremendous things, marvelous things, that no one had ever done before: fly off the roof, fly across the wonderful, silver city! Of course they could do it! Of course, of course...

Then somebody saw them from a window, and they were dragged down the iron ladder to a roomful of shocked and distressed people. 'Oh!' they said, and their voices made a loud, accusing sound. 'Oh, you naughty, wicked ——'

But Robin and Ricky were silent, their feet still wet with moonlit snow, their eyes still shining with loveliness...

Then Poppet, arrayed in a shirt, prowled about the corridors one night. She was Peter Pan looking for his shadow: 'Oh, where did I leave it — where *can* it be?' The darkness was swarming with magical folk; they talked to her and gave her directions: 'This way, this way, Peter...' But something went wrong somewhere, and she found, not a shadow, but a substantial matron.

And there was another time when Mimsy hid under the sofa in the Committee Room and stuck a pin into the ankle of a pompous gentleman who spoke disparagingly of Robin. The pompous gentleman screamed, and Mimsy was hauled forth, looking very flushed and heroic. She refused to apologize, and accepted with the utmost dignity every punishment meted out to her. The other Kiplings were both appreciative and comforting: 'You are one of the Christian Martyrs, Mimsy!' It was a fine idea. They elaborated it later on, and held a grand arena scene in a corner of the playground, with Ricky as the principal lion.

Then Boots slapped a little girl who was indiscreet enough to express some doubt as to the Duke's claim to noble birth; and right on top of that Robin made a spectacular escape (*via* a window, a water-pipe, and a wall), and, having begged sixpence from a benevolent-looking old lady with noisy false teeth, went riding in the Underground for hours and hours and hours. She came back at nightfall, slightly dizzy; and the next morning all five Kiplings were found making dramatic speeches on the joys of freedom, and urging the whole institution to up and away...

But however distressing they might be to the Important People, to the orphans they were the spice of life. There was a glamour surrounding their escapades, even if they did collapse in defeat, and a dashing color to their earlier adventures: 'Oh, we lived there — and we lived there, too — and we sat in the front row and saw *everything* — and then we felt like we was lost, so Mamma made a flag out of 'er petticoat and climbed up a tree ——' Everywhere they went remarkable people seemed to flourish, and remarkable things seemed to occur: hail fell as big as eggs, and horses ran away, and terrific winds blew, and the Queen smiled at them and the King gave them a special bow, and the birds in Kensington Gardens sat in their laps, as tame as kittens...

The orphans would crowd around and listen wistfully. Then they would make up brave lies about experiences of their own; and the Kiplings, scenting competition, would elaborate and intensify their recitals until they burst all bonds of reason. And after that they would always be a little muddled in their thought as to what was fact and what was fancy.

But although they were only too charmed to spin off these tales of their various adventures, there were other things — the Swag, and the Parade, and little family games and secret jokes — that they kept hidden away safely behind a wall of reticence. 'Muglihug-bug' had taught them to do that. 'Muglihug-bug' was a joke. You said it in a rumbling sort of voice, and flapped your hands behind your ears. It was extraordinarily funny! But when Poppet did it in public, the orphans were frankly unamused: '*Why* is it a joke?' they asked. The Kiplings had never thought of that. They stopped laughing; and the magic ran out of the joke, like water running out of a glass. They felt surprised, and rather ashamed. 'Let's play jacks,' Mimsy said. 'Come on — come on!' And none of them, except Boots, ever rumbled 'Muglihug-bug' again. Boots was too small to see what had happened; he still thought it was a joke; he still thought it was extraordinarily funny...

Two years swung slowly round, and at the end of them the Duke returned with money in his pockets and his indomitable spirits high once more. He had a talk with the Important People, and all their advice ran in one ear and out the other. 'Oh, that's all right! They'll get along! They're lively — I understand them!' His confidence was colossal.

The Kiplings were plunged into a state of delirious happiness. 'We're going again!' they shrieked, scarlet with excitement. 'The Duke's come for us — the Duke's come for us!' They dashed up and down the familiar corridors, urging their friends, in dramatic whispers, to skip off soon and join them in the outer world, and giving away pressed leaves and their most cherished marbles and the gilt buttons off Ricky's winter coat, and promising wonderful promises that came from the bottom of their hearts. Then, when the moment of departure arrived, they burst into a flood of tears and felt a sudden desperate affection for all the orphans well up within them. And the orphans felt a sudden desperate affection for the Kiplings. And everybody embraced everybody else, and had quite a stirring time...

That evening, to celebrate their liberty and reunion, the Duke took them to a very grand restaurant.

They sat at a corner table, and ate huge quantities of expensive food, and roared with shrill, excited laughter until they were quite limp. And Ricky made up a piece about a man who tied a bubble to a string and flew it from his purple chimney; and the others beat time with their forks and said, 'Rum-tum, rum-tum,' very softly, as if they were an orchestra. And then Poppet tipped the flowers over in the middle of the table, and three waiters rushed forward, and the Manager, after due deliberation, came forth and requested them to leave.

'Sir!' said the Duke haughtily. But they were just going, anyhow, so it really didn't matter.

Then, with a grandiloquent gesture, they bought tickets for a music concert, and went racing into the lofty hall as if they were arriving at a circus. They sprawled in their seats, and yummed toffee in the face of overwhelming gentility, and studied the program with bright interest, and — when the conductor appeared — clapped with much spirit until every one else had left off.

Then the lights were dimmed, and the Kiplings grew quiet and expectant...

A brief hush; the raised baton; and something silver-toned came out of the silence, something lovely, but a little intricate, that flowed about them — making patterns of sound that they couldn't understand.

After a few moments Ricky leaned back and closed his eyes, and a look, almost of rapture, came into his face. What did it mean, what did it matter? The hall, the audience, the resplendent stage were slipping away from him, and he was soaring on wings of music — higher — higher — until he felt lost and absorbed in a world of sound. He wondered, dimly, if it would ever end; and it seemed impossible, for he had forgotten what muteness meant.

Mimsy was still and tranquil, while the music passed over her in slow and beautiful waves. She smiled, and was content to let it pass over...

Boots and Poppet were very much interested in the man on the dais. They watched him shake his long hair and do wonderful things with a little stick: flatten out the sounds with a smoothing movement of his hand, and, with another gesture, bring the notes to a quivering peak. Boots imitated him in the half-light, tossing his head solemnly and flourishing his arms; and Poppet tried to hum an accompaniment, but couldn't — because there didn't seem to be any tune to follow. So she made a paper hat out of the program and put it on Ricky...

Robin sat bolt upright, looking rather puzzled. Something was going on about her, but she could find no meaning to it. All these people, so still, so attentive, they must understand; and Ricky too — perhaps he understood. She wanted to lean over and ask him, softly: 'What is it, please tell me!' but she dared not interrupt him when he looked like that. She tried again to pin her attention to the music: 'I want to listen — I *want* to!' But it was vague and obscure; it baffled her efforts to comprehend.

A bow, a hubbub of applause; then it went on once more, a little different, but still blurred in meaning. Time sank away, like a bell under a sea; the stage swung round and round in a blur of light; more bows, more volleys of applause...

Then suddenly Robin's lethargy was shattered. She started up and listened, her hands clenched in her lap. Yes — yes — the music was speaking to her now, rushing like a terrific wind, crashing like waves! She lifted the program against her eyes and strained out the name: 'Ride of the Valkyries.' Little prickles of excitement darted up and down her back. The Valkyries — *her* Valkyries! Oh, she could hear them all right: they were riding furiously through the music, swords raised in the air; the wind was shrieking and slashing at them as they thundered across the battlefield. Heroes for Valhalla! Onward and on they galloped, the horses' hoofs pounding, the wind growing higher and wilder.

She felt blown and buffeted by the great surge of sound; the prickles were like needle-points, so that she shivered and smarted under them. Faster, faster — hair streaming in the storm — swords flashing out as bright as fire! She wanted to jump up, to wave her arms, to shout to the Valkyries at the top of her lungs: 'Hail! Hail! On to Valhalla!' She must do it, she must, or something inside of her would explode into a thousand little pieces...

Then it was over with a shriek of wind, and Robin — all red and shaky — burst out crying and hiccoughed loudly through the intermission.

When the concert had come to an end, they left the hall and marched towards the station under a golden moon. 'Our train leaves at midnight,' the Duke told them. 'The Monmouth Special!'

Midnight — a glamorous hour! For two years they had forgotten that things happened at midnight. The sky was different, they began to notice it; the shadows were rich with secrets, and the lamps at the corners were huge yellow stars.

Everything was beautiful and mysterious; everything — everywhere — was beautiful and mysterious.

They held hands tightly and walked in a row, their eyes very wide and young. 'Is the moon always like this at midnight?' Boots wanted to know.

And, 'Always!' the Duke said gravely.

They sat on a bench in the station, half-asleep under a cold glare of light. They were going away: no more bells buzzing into their heads, no more nasty whispers, no more Certain Things at a Certain Time. All over now, all over!

The Duke strolled off and bought a dozen bananas; and after a while the train came grinding down the track, and the Kiplings stumbled to their feet, rocking with weariness. Everything was suddenly blurred, a little uncertain; and, for one brief moment, their thoughts flew, panic-stricken, back to the familiar rooms where the orphans were sleeping.

'Oh — where are we going?'

Then the Duke's voice sounded, clear and confident: 'Forward!' he directed — and forward they went.

3

After that came the boarding-houses and the shabby hotels, and a long string of different schools wherein the Kiplings distinguished themselves by holding heated controversies with their teachers and being periodically suspended.

Sometimes the Duke wrote notes of apology to irate individuals whom his offspring had insulted; and occasionally he set them all before him in a row and delivered a long and eloquent lecture, studding it with quotations and bits of original verse. But they knew, with unerring intuition, that he was only playing at being a stern parent. The girl with the golden hair had been different. She had talked to them, told them and asked them things, with an almost passionate intensity; perhaps because she had realized that it was all up to her, that the light-hearted Duke — with his wandering fancies, his careless conception of the business of life—would never drop the vagabond for the paternal rôle.

The Kiplings had been hurt and swayed by her voice, they had shed bitter tears of repentance and turned over innumerable new leaves; but when the Duke orated before them they sat attentive and interested, but not at all downcast. They might have been watching a familiar play with a favorite actor; they could even have supplied his cues if he chanced to overlook a few points: 'You've forgotten Casabianca, and about Honoring Ourselves, and the 'Ole in the Dike...' And after a while the Duke would throw up his hands in despair, and wrinkle his face in a funny, defeated fashion. And they would begin to laugh, a trifle warily at first (in case he had altered since the last time), and then louder and more boisterously, because it was, after all, just a joke!

Only one day the little act swerved from its usual course:

Poppet had been naughty, really naughty, and she was swaggering about it into the bargain. While the Duke lectured, his words pouring about her like inoffensive rain, she swung her legs and pulled her jersey up over her nose. She sat that way for a long time, her eyes beaming at him; and suddenly the Duke made a bewildered gesture and cried: 'Oh, Babsy, Babsy! what shall I do?' just like a little boy.

The Kiplings were shocked, terrified — for Babsy was the name of the girl with the golden hair.

Poppet drooped forward and hid her face in her petticoat, stricken with guilt; and the others all rushed across the room to comfort the Duke:

'We'll be good — dear, dear Duke, we'll be good — we *will* try!'

And for three weeks each of them led a blameless existence!

A year or two after that came the Lovely Summer. They always called it that, for down the dim lane of their memories it glowed delicately, dreamlike — the lovely summer when the Duke took them into the country and left them with Miss Daphne Wibblestress, a spinster lady who had

had a romantic tragedy in her youth and still prayed for Him and kept His picture (all side-burns and watch-fob) next to her bed.

The Kiplings got off the train at Little Banterbridge, and the station-master told them to follow the road past Banterbridge Hall and then to turn down the first lane on the left, and keep straight on until they came to a coppice of larches. It was sunset-time, and the leaves swung fragile and golden above the drowsy street. There was the Hall, standing far back behind clipped yews and plushy lawns; and there was the lane, hedged in by hawthorns, and dappled with sunlight and deep green shadows. It looked like a magic path, leading into fairyland, winding and winding, so that you never knew what lay just ahead. The Duke went first, and the Kiplings followed him slowly, lugging their bundles and snuffling like excited puppies. The hedges rose above their heads on either side; they could hear a brook somewhere — a wet, chattery sound; they could smell all sorts of strange, intriguing things. Then they came to the larches, swaying a little, beautiful and sunny; and, beyond them, to the cottage of Miss Daphne Wibblestress.

It was set in the midst of a garden, with all its windows shining like honey-colored jewels. At the back of it there was a great field full of tall grass and scarlet poppies; and in front of it, across the lane and beyond the hedge, the Downs rolled out, softly curved, rhythmic, peaceful — the western slants all rich with golden light, the hollows holding pools of violet shadow. There was a low stone wall about the garden, and inside there were hollyhocks and sunflowers and larkspur, and little tight pink roses that looked as if they had been fashioned from crinkly paper. There was a square lawn and a pebbled path — and Miss Wibblestress in the open doorway, with three other children and a small, fat dog named the Prince of Wales.

They had high-tea under the shade of the hollyhocks, with the Downs growing misty and mauve before them. They had sausage-rolls and milk and scones, and strawberries with their stalks left on so that they could bob them into little mounds of sugar.

And Miss Wibblestress said: 'They seem very *solemn!*'

And the Duke said, cheerfully: 'Oh, no! They're just stunned!'

And the Kiplings examined the three other children, and the three other children examined the Kiplings, with eager and furtive curiosity...

After that each day was a glamorous adventure.

There were hours spent in the poppy-field behind the garden. You could dash across it in noisy parades, or slither through it on your stomach, or lie quite still, quite silent, with thousands and thousands of little green spears springing up about you. It was like a forest there, but all soft and friendly and delicate. It was cool sometimes, and sometimes it was warm; but always, as far as you could see, there was nothing anywhere but grass and poppies. The world seemed to be full of them, rising tall and straight and motionless, or dipping back and forth, back and forth, with a faint sweet smell and a faint sweet sound. And you would lie as still as still, without a thought in your head; and the sunshine would run into you, until you felt heavy with it, heavy and drowsy-eyed and utterly content. And the soft green forest would close in on you, waving a little, whispering, laughing. You belonged to it, and it belonged to you — that was what it said, over and over; until, half-asleep, you became all muddled up and felt, somehow, as if you, too, were grass, as if you, too, were poppies — rooted in the earth, sucking in the sun.

And there were other hours in the pine copse at the farther turn of the lane, where the ground was soft and springy with needles and the sunshine dripped between slim columns and fell in golden pools at your feet.

Knights! Everybody cantering through the green gloom, with paper helmets and wooden swords. Ricky is King Arthur, and another little boy named Horace, bravely leaping the centuries, is King Richard. Both of them have dashing mustaches, smarmed on with a piece of licorice, and you can tell that both of them have very powerful steeds because they keep on saying 'Whoa!' and straining back with their arms held out tautly. The two armies start from opposite sides of the copse, advancing with great stealth and quivering with excitement. Sh! Sh! not a whisper, not a breath! Minutes pass; the sun sinks down; the western sky, luminous and lovely with color, is throwing a strange light to the trees, half-pink, half-saffron, so that the wood seems bewitched. Now the kings trumpet their orders to attack, and out they all burst, whooping like Indians. Their helmets blow away as if they were kites; and everybody kills everybody else, briskly and efficiently; and each royal gentleman, backed up by his retinue, announces with great gusto that he has won the battle. They come to a deadlock. They always come to a deadlock, because no one is ever willing to admit defeat...

They built a dam across the brook on the other side of the larches, working over it for days with the deepest absorption. From breakfast to dinner, from dinner to tea — they had no room in their thoughts for anything else. They splashed about in the silver water, they sat down in it when they were hot and drank it when they were thirsty; half the night they dreamed of it, murmuring and glittering, under a tremendous moon. And at last, at last! Miss Wibblestress in a long white gown came hurrying through the trees to behold their wonderful achievement; and Mrs. Puddington, on her way from Big to Little Banterbridge, stopped off for several minutes to swell the gathering. And the Prince of Wales shrieked with delight; and the children pranced on the banks with excitement, and climbed up the old willow to get a panoramic view of the result of their labors.

And the Kiplings were so happy, so terribly happy, that they felt as if they would burst!

Then they ate the nasturtiums — a whole bed of them in front of the scullery window. Miss Wibblestress was asleep under the larches in an orange-and-purple hammock, and everything, as far as they could see and hear, was perfectly still and perfectly quiet: the Downs rolling out in long golden waves, the lane empty, the hollyhocks sketching thin green shadows on the sunny grass...

The children wandered about the garden in a lackadaisical fashion, ripe for any suggestion:

'If we cut the hammock strings,' Robin observed dreamily, 'Miss Daphne would fall down — bang!'

'Bang!' Poppet echoed, and looked hopeful.

They all gazed at the hammock strings, a speculative light in their eyes. If it had been one of themselves swaying there, they wouldn't have hesitated; but, since it was Miss Wibblestress, they paused, faltered, and regretfully relinquished the idea. Miss Wibblestress was a grown-up — incomprehensible, and therefore invested with a certain subtle glamour. She was to be regarded with the faint touch of awe, the faint touch of suspicion, due to one whose motives were frequently obscure and whose practices were frequently inexplicable — to one who led, although in the same spot and at the same time, a life mysteriously and infinitely apart from their own. They were quite fond of Miss Wibblestress; they supposed, vaguely, that she was very powerful and very clever and very good. They marveled at the vast and glittering freedom of which she was mistress, and they marveled still more at her self-restraint in eating only two sweets when there was no one to prevent her from gobbling up a boxful; and they liked the way her hair crinkled and the way she smelt, all delicate and flowery. But she was different from them, they never forgot that. She was far above them, remote, aloof — like the trees towering far above the small grasses in the copse; and, like the trees, she bent down sometimes, rustling affectionately, letting them have glimpses of a tremendous sky which she could touch and which she knew all about. Now and then she told them how once she had been a little girl; but, although they didn't exactly doubt her statements, they couldn't quite believe them. Miss Wibblestress as a little girl was too wide a jump for their usually nimble imaginations. The best they could do was to picture her precisely the same but on a miniature scale; they could reduce her, but they couldn't alter her, and certainly they would never have dared to think of her as being, at any time, bereft of wisdom and authority. There would have been something almost sacrilegious in that. For she *was* a grown-up — however authentic her claims to former childhood might be. She was a lady in a long white gown, only slightly less influential than God; and if they had ever come across her frightened, or weeping, or without any clothes on, they would have been deeply upset, inexpressibly shocked...

So they left Miss Wibblestress swinging under the larches in her orange-and-purple hammock, and ate up the nasturtiums instead.

It was Robin who started it. She nibbled a leaf, and found it rather interesting. Then they all nibbled leaves, and after that they moulded the experiment into a sort of game. Dividing themselves into opposing sides, they began noisily to attack the bed. They advanced on their stomachs, gobbling at a great rate — leaves and flowers, stems, earth, and various unfortunate insects. They choked and sputtered; they thrust their faces into the bright pool of petals, and opened their mouths greedily. The stems were full of a bitter juice, the leaves had a peppery taste, the little trumpets at the end of the gold-and-crimson flowers held drops of surprising sweetness. Forward they all lunged, grinding everything up between their teeth and swallowing it with a sort of reckless and ferocious delight. They were vandals, they were rowdy invaders of a small, defenseless realm; and the nasturtiums were doomed, utterly doomed, every last one of them!

Then Miss Wibblestress woke up, unhooked her hammock, and came wandering back through the trees and into the garden. She gazed down, rather blankly, at the crawling children and the mangled remains of her nasturtium-bed.

'Well!' she remarked.

They sat up abruptly, their cheeks bulging, and shreds of torn flowers dangling from their mouths.

'What have you done?' she asked.

They gaped at her, and giggled uneasily.

Then Miss Wibblestress bent forward and began to talk to them with an air of awful solemnity, following her usual method of rebuke which consisted of a series of dramatic questions which she hastened to answer herself. How, she wished to know (lowering her voice), would God feel when He saw them eating up all His dear little blossoms? He would, she reported (raising her voice), be grieved — deeply grieved. And what would happen to the earth if every one were to do such barbaric things? It would, she declared, be a howling wilderness, a place of desolation...

After several minutes of this spirited repartee, they were all reduced to a state of abject penitence. Their lower lips hung down pendulously; their hearts grew faint. They watched Miss Wibblestress sweep under the arch of roses and into the house; then they stared, in conscience-stricken silence, at the scene of recent slaughter. What had they done? 'Oh!' Ricky said in a tragic voice, 'they were so pretty — they were so *pretty!*' He wanted to weep for their lost prettiness. He saw them all again as they had been: golden and crimson in the sunshine, little spurts of color, lovely little petals, delicately and intricately made. A long time ago they had started in the earth; the sun had called to them, the silver fingers of the rain had found them; they had grown and grown in a wonderful, secret fashion. And now they were gone. They were all mashed up inside of Poppet, inside of Horace — inside of *him*. It was too much! Crushed with guilt, he fled behind the hollyhocks, and was sick...

After tea they went skipping across the field of poppies to wave to the train. They did it every evening, just at sundown, when all the earth lay languid and lovely under a radiant sky. They stood in a long row on the stone wall, flourishing their crumpled handkerchiefs; and the engine-man leaned out and threw them a piece of coal — he always did. He was a very remarkable man, sort of black-looking, with a glittering white grin. They kept the coal in a secret hollow at the edge of the pine wood. It was Special coal; it was almost magic. And sometimes people in the train signaled back to them. Look! look! the lady in the yellow hat! Sure enough, there she was, bobbing and smiling. They wagged their handkerchiefs with renewed gusto, feeling tremendously flattered at her attention.

Then it was gone, leaving a thin ripple of pink smoke; and twilight began to slide through the trees and over the slow-curved Downs. It was a wistful hour: there were tears in it, and little fluttering smiles...

They went to bed with the first stars; but after Miss Wibblestress had gone downstairs again with a candle in each hand, Robin hauled them all out into the middle of the room. She had had a sudden inspiration. They would pray, every last one of them, asking forgiveness for their nasturtium sin. She was very rapt and solemn about it. 'Kneel down!' They knelt down obediently, torn between giggles and awe. Then they prayed, taking it in turns: some of them muttered vague pleas for mercy in a great hurry, as if they were about to die; and some of them went on and on — especially Robin and Ricky, who became quite eloquent and dramatic in the end; and one or two of them didn't know any prayers, so they said Grace instead; and Horace said a poem about a fire-engine.

Then they all went back to bed, and slept the sleep of the righteous.

They had discovered something wonderful to do in the long summer evenings. They made lanterns out of strawberry-boxes and put little candles inside of them; then they placed the lanterns round the lawn in a glowing circle. They looked very beautiful in front of the tall shafts of larkspur and all the other dimly outlined flowers: the boxes seemed to be fashioned of pink ivory, as frail as eggshells, and the flames flickered through the narrow chinks, half-red, half-amber...

Then the children would step within the circle and dance, softly, solemnly, without a sound. Sometimes they all danced together, each one following a pattern of his own, uninfluenced and untroubled by the others. And sometimes they took it in turns. It was more elaborate then, a sort of hushed and thrilling ceremony. You went off and crouched behind the hollyhocks for a moment, then you came forth — no longer Poppet or Boots or Muriel, but a dancer, with mysterious music inside of you, with a lovely lilting feeling in your body. You passed into the circle and moved through the pale glow: sometimes as swift as the wind, pirouetting, with head flung back; and sometimes very gently, swaying and swirling, as the flowers and trees danced; and sometimes like an Egyptian, stepping tremendously high and doing stiff, brisk things with your arms. It all depended upon the music inside; you listened to it, you gave yourself up to it without planning or thinking...

Evening after evening they went through the ceremony, and repetition seemed to deepen rather than to diminish the magical quality of those twilight hours. They were bathed in a warm and simple sort of happiness; they were lost to time and lost to the humdrum world. They talked seldom and rarely laughed — for the garden was full of witchery, full of a mystic hush.

Miss Wibblestress often came outside to see the dancing; and now and then people strolling between Big and Little Banterbridge stopped and leaned over the wall to watch. The children didn't mind: spectators neither embarrassed nor interested them — they were negligible, they were nothing but shadowy figures hovering on the outskirts of enchantment.

But one evening, while Ricky, with a grave, absorbed face, was pirouetting by himself within the circle of lanterns, and the others were sprawled out quietly attentive on the grass, half a dozen boys came clumping noisily between the hawthorn hedges. They paused at the gateway, and stared in. They looked surprised at first — even faintly intrigued; then one of them began to laugh, and the others, immediately rising to the occasion, commenced to jeer at the performance. They mimicked Ricky with grotesque caperings; they waxed sarcastic over the strawberry-box lanterns; they shattered into a thousand fragments the mystic hush of the garden...

Ricky stopped dancing, abruptly; and the rest of the children stumbled to their feet. For a moment or two they were more bewildered than indignant: they gaped at the intruders, as they might have gaped at a herd of elephants; then they sprang forward, furious, their hands clenched. 'Go away — go away!' they cried.

The boys, who had been on the verge of departing, turned back again, opposition giving zest to their mockery.

'Go away — *go away!*' They were shrieking the command now, fiercely, at the top of their lungs. All the still loveliness of their mood had vanished; all their mysterious music had been blotted out. They began to prance up and down, scarlet with rage. 'We'll kill you!' they screamed. 'We'll *kill* you ——'

The boys refused to look appropriately alarmed; so they dismissed threats for action and flung themselves through the gateway. Ricky landed like a cat on the nearest figure, and began to claw him in a most unorthodox fashion; and Robin wrenched a stone loose from the wall and hurled it with all her might and main at a shadowy Goliath.

'Aow!' he yelled, and his nose began to bleed.

Robin was staggered, entranced! 'It's bleeding!' she informed him with a roar of triumph. 'It's *bleeding!*'

And the others, equally gratified, took the words up and flourished them with ear-splitting gusto: 'It's bleeding — bleeding — bleeding ——'

Having thus picturesquely damaged one of the enemy, they were gripped with an intense desire to make all the rest of the offending noses bleed. To this end they threw flowers and rocks and the yellow watering-can; and Poppet, doubly inspired, threw a lantern which smacked against somebody and promptly burst into flames. They lifted up their voices as one man: 'Oh!' they screamed. '*Look!*' It was too wonderful! Their hearts almost leaped out of their mouths! In the terrific confusion and excitement they entirely forgot why they were doing this: the cause was lost, but their spirits were up. They were out, now, not so much for revenge as for a jolly good fight! They made another charge, shrieking like hooligans; and after a brief skirmish the boys faltered, scattered, and then fled — enriched with the discovery that little girls, when thoroughly aroused, are a wild and devilish lot, with no sense of sportsmanship and no sense of restraint.

Intoxicated with this glamorous victory, the children rushed down the lane, chasing their victims to the very gates of Banterbridge Hall. Then they swaggered back to the distraught Miss Wibblestress, jabbering cockily about their prowess, and exhibiting their scars as if they were medals...

The next evening they were out on the lawn again, with their strawberry-box lanterns; but after that, whenever anybody peered over the garden wall, they stopped dancing and stood quite still, waiting for them to go away.

One morning it rained. Soft silver mists were spun over the Downs; long silver fingers were flattening the grass, and harping on the leaves in the coppice.

The Duke had sent them a little brown tent, with a cotton flag to fly from the peak; and they were all huddled inside it now, at the edge of the wet field. A wonderful feeling — to be in a little brown tent, hot and safe, with the rain falling, with the rain beating on the canvas as if it were a drum...

There was a thoughtful quality to the day, and they responded to it simply, as they so often responded in mood to the varying *nuances* of the summer.

'Don't let's play anything, let's talk,' somebody suggested.

So pedantic an opening invested the occasion with a certain air of importance.

'What about?' the others wanted to know.

Poppet had an inspiration. 'Us!'

That was a good idea, and decidedly novel; but no one knew where to begin. Mimsy cupped her chin in her hands.

'Let's talk about what we're going to be when we grow up.'

They were charmed with the suggestion, and all commenced jabbering at once.

'Stop!' Robin commanded. 'We'd better take it in turns. Boots, you go first.'

Boots was plunged into a deep sea of meditation—a stout, rather solemn little boy with yellow hair and round, wondering eyes. 'A fireman!' he decided at last, and his face shone.

'With an 'elmet?' Poppet demanded.

'With a — great — big — 'elmet!'

'Then so'll I!' she announced. And that was settled.

'All right, 'Orace, you tell next.'

'A minister,' Horace declared virtuously.

They looked at him with astonishment and respect. 'Really and truly!'

He saw that he had made an impression, so: 'A big minister,' he elaborated. 'Maybe a Bishop!'

This was most thrilling! They could already see Horace in his pulpit, talking familiarly about God. 'Can we come to your church?' they requested.

He said, 'Yes,' very graciously. 'You can sit on the platform with me.'

They felt highly honored, and insisted that Horace have the last piece of licorice.

'Now, Mimsy?'

The light from the opening fell on Mimsy's face — a delicate, wistful face, the corners of the mouth pinched together a little fastidiously, the chin held high. 'I shall be a Lady,' she said. 'I shall live in a lovely 'ouse with a beautiful garden all round it, and I shall have four nice children.'

Robin was disappointed. 'But don't you want to *do* things, Mimsy?'

'What things?'

'Oh — battles and — and *exciting* things.'

'No. I want to be a Lady.'

'So do I,' Poppet decided. 'Without the four children.'

'But you're going to be a fireman,' Boots reminded her.

'I'll be both.'

'Oh, no, you can't!' Horace said. 'They don't go together.'

Poppet became huffy, and lay on her stomach. 'Tra-la-dee-da ——' she warbled, implying that she had washed her hands of the whole affair.

'Leave off, Poppet! Now, Muriel?'

But Muriel didn't want to tell.

'Ah, *please!*' they coaxed, all avid curiosity.

She wavered for a moment, then consented — a very little girl with a very little voice 'A Queen!' Wonderful and enchanting secret!

The others looked a bit thoughtful.

'Well, perhaps you *will* be,' Boots said, his voice very earnest. Why not? There *were* Queens.

Then Poppet sat up again, tousle-haired and sprightly. 'Robin next,' she demanded.

Robin was very straight, her eyes shining. 'I shall be a soldier — like Joan. I shall ride into battle on a white 'orse, with my sword in my 'and. And when our armies've won, I'll be killed — bang! — right off!'

'Oh, *no!*' They were distressed. 'Please don't be killed, Robbie!'

She stepped down a trifle from her pedestal. 'Not *that* time, then. I'll come 'ome instead, and everybody'll blow trumpets, and I'll gallop down the street on my white 'orse!'

Poppet was again captivated. 'So'll I!'

'But you can't keep on being things, Poppet!'

She pretended not to hear them. 'I'll 'ave a yellow 'orse, and I'll ring a bell!'

'Soldiers don't ring bells,' Horace informed her.

She flared up. 'I'll ring a bell if I want to!'

'Then you'll be crazy,' he pronounced, with a certain satisfaction.

She grew scarlet with indignation. 'Crazy yourself — you silly old minister!'

'Oh, *Poppet!*' They were all very shocked.

So she lay on her stomach again, and hummed.

'Now, Ricky?'

But Ricky shook his head, and stared out over the waving poppies.

'Please tell — please tell!' they begged.

Still he was silent: a thin, secret-faced little boy with restless hands.

'But that's not fair! Everybody else has.'

Ricky looked up for a moment, and something in his eyes made Robin say: 'Never mind — let's 'ave Eric next.'

But the others were persistent, scenting some tremendous mystery.

'Go on — go on! You've *got* to!'

'You don't want to be anything!' Horace challenged.

'I do, too!' Ricky returned hotly.

'Then why don't you tell?'

He seemed to withdraw into himself, far, far within, so that they were left with nothing but a shell to stare at...

Robin had a strange feeling of anxiety. 'If he doesn't want to, he doesn't 'ave to!' She knew that look of his: she understood it, even if she didn't understand what it concealed.

Then somebody began to say, scornfully: 'He's afraid! He's afraid ——'

And Horace taunted: 'He wants to be a dust-man, but he's scared to tell!'

'Dust-man, dust-man ——' they all chanted.

And suddenly Ricky stood up, trembling, his face very red. 'Leave me alone!' he cried passionately. 'I won't tell you — I'll never, *never* tell you!' And then he ran out of the little tent, and sat down by himself in the rain.

The others were astonished. 'What is the matter with 'im?' they asked one another. 'What is the matter?'

But Robin felt a small, sharp pain run through her. They had hurt Ricky: without knowing why or how, they had driven him away from their circle.

Every afternoon when it was fair they had tea out in the field, by the larches. The earth would be very lovely at that hour, all warm and mellow and full of peace. Beauty would be theirs then, as much as their hearts could hold: the simple beauty of blowing grass and of the green gloom in the coppice, of leaves singing, and of the soft plum-colored shadows of clouds moving across the Downs...

These things were close to them, belonged to them: they could be touched with the hands and loved with the eyes. But now and then, in rare moments, there seemed to be something else — something more profound and more mysterious than this clear, candid beauty. Beneath the great wings of sunshine the earth would lie tremulous: it would have a secret — a wonderful secret — and they would seem to falter on the brink of it. One step — one step — and they would understand! Keep still, wind! Be quiet, little leaves! Listen and wait for — what?

But the moments would fall away, would be lost and forgotten; and time would march on once more...

Tea outside was quite different from tea inside. Everything, even bread-and-butter, had a new taste then, a sort of *interesting* taste. They would eat off white plates with pink roses round the edges; and when they had finished eating, they would sprawl back in the warm grass, growing heavy-eyed and drowsy, with ants moving ticklingly over their bare legs, and the little shadows of leaves fluttering on their faces...

Oh, never end, Lovely Summer, never end!

One day Ricky rolled over and pressed his face in the grass; and one day Mimsy turned to it and wept.

'What is the matter?' they asked. 'Why are you crying, Mimsy?'

She wouldn't tell them for a while; then, 'Because I don't want to be a Lady, and I don't want a 'Ouse. I just want to stay like this — forever and ever!'

They were silent under the singing leaves — wondering. And then, together, they made a plan.

That night, when the moon was pasted high against the window, Robin crawled out of bed and wakened the rest of the children. 'Sh!' she said; and 'Sh! Sh!' they cautioned one another in piercing whispers. They crept carefully through the hall and down the dim stairway — a line of little white figures, scarcely daring to breathe.

Outside, the world lay bewitched. The trees were gigantic, the flowers blurred and fragile like flowers in a dream. It was windless; and every leaf, every blade of grass, seemed to be held under some strange, bright spell...

They faltered for a moment, half-frightened before such unearthly beauty; then they stepped into it and tiptoed through the garden to the lane. Their nightgowns were clutched up, their eyes were very wide. '*Oo!*' they exclaimed softly. 'Look at the moon! Look at the 'olly'ocks ——' They pointed things out to one another; and Boots breathed very hard; and Robin danced up and down in the wet grass, as if something a little mad had entered into her.

The cottage was behind them now: it seemed infinitely far away and immaterial; they had escaped from it into a new world — a world of silence and stillness, of vivid white radiance and impenetrable shadow.

Now the lane was turning, and the pine copse was looming before them. It was huge, black; it was dense with mystery...

'Can't we stay 'ere?' Boots whispered in a small, anxious voice.

Robin shook her head. 'Magic is only in the wood — it won't 'appen anywhere else.' And even when they came right up to the wood, to the very path, she didn't turn back, or even falter for an instant. 'Come on!' she said. 'Come on ——' So they stumbled after her, clinging together, trying not to look at the strange shapes about them. Nobody spoke, nobody made a sound; and at last they came to a small clearing within a circle of trees.

They stopped. They caught their breath for a moment.

Moonlight lay brightly there — so beautiful, so beautiful — the very essence of enchantment!

Robin stepped into it delicately, as she might have stepped into a silver pool; and her face, her hands, her long white gown, flashed out with dramatic clearness against the darkness beyond her.

'Make a ring!' she whispered. 'Come on — quick!'

So they, too, stepped into the moonlight, and joined hands.

'Now!' Robin said solemnly. 'We are in the middle of the wood! We are in the magic circle! Now we can make our wish!'

Everything was quite hushed: no birds, no wind, no soft tree laughter.

They looked at one another, and their eyes were very large.

Then Robin spoke again, in a sort of chanting voice: 'Please, we don't want to go away from 'ere! We want it to be like this, all the time!' She paused; then, slowly, impressively, she pronounced: 'Oggy-choggy-blappy-swubble!' It was a spell!

They waited, taut and expectant: waited for the trees to crash like thunder, for the moon to fall out of the sky...

After a while they dropped hands, and looked around.

'Won't anything 'appen?' somebody wanted to know.

Robin was still listening, still watching. 'Perhaps something *is* 'appening, right now — perhaps ——'

They gazed at her eagerly. 'Where, Robbie, *where?*'

But somebody else said: 'No, we go away first — *then* it 'appens!'

Oh!

'We 'ave to go away!' they told one another.

They turned and started towards the path; but Robin suddenly stopped short.

'The moonlight!' she remembered. 'We've got to take some moonlight with us and put it under our pillows, and sleep on it — *'ard!*'

So, watching her, they cupped their hands, then closed them quickly full of moonlight...

The path seemed narrower now, and darker. It was secret and lost in a wilderness of trees, thousands and thousands of trees, as tall as the sky, as strong as giants. What was that? And that? Oh, look — look! Did it really move? Were they really trees! Or were they — black Things — all about them, leaning towards them, coming in on them — closer — *closer* ——

Poppet gave a little gasp, and began to run. And suddenly they were all running, wildly, frantically, between the pines and down the deserted lane. They didn't pause once until they had reached the garden; then they halted abruptly — white and trembling, with their eyes like saucers. They stared at one another, wondering why it had happened. Then somebody made a dreadful discovery:

'The moonlight — the moonlight!'

They gazed down at their open hands, frightened hands. Somewhere along the dark path they had dropped it: it was lost in the shadows, gone — gone forever!

All except Robin's. Breathless, panic-stricken, Robin was still holding her moonlight in closed hands.

But the end of the summer did come at last, and there was only one day left to them.

They wandered through the field, and never before had the poppies been so red, the grass so soft; they stood beside their fine dam and admired it all over again; and trailed about in the woods; and climbed on to the wall and waved fervently to the train — waved and waved, until the last coach was far out of sight and even the pink swirl of smoke had melted into the sky. Nobody said very much, because they thought, once more, that the end of their world had come. How could they live without the friendly Downs, without tea under the larches, and dancing in the garden; how could they possibly be happy again? They touched things lovingly as they passed, and stared at things with tragic eyes.

Good-bye, Lovely Summer, good-bye...

At twilight, when the earth was mauve-colored and misty, they went about collecting various little things to take away with them. A stone from the gray wall, and a handful of needles from the pine copse; one of the white plates rimmed with roses, a strawberry-box lantern, a poppy, some grass, another stone out of the brook, a lump of coal that the engine-man had thrown to them, and a hair cut carefully from the Prince of Wales's tail. They put them all together in a cardboard box, then wrapped the box up in layers and layers of paper, and tied it with a great deal of string.

And that night they slept with their heads under their pillows — so that nobody should hear them!

The Duke arrived the next morning, as jaunty as ever; but as soon as he saw the Kiplings he understood. Perhaps the girl told him: perhaps she whispered, 'Take care of them — take care of them — for their hearts are almost breaking!' He was very gentle and kind, and somewhat worried. He chatted to them about the big boat they were going on, and the big sea they were soon to cross; he promised to teach them dozens of new ballads, and to buy them all the toffee they could possibly hold...

But their hearts remained leaden, their faces set.

Then he took them into his arms, and said: 'I'm sorry, old scouts! I'm sorry!' And suddenly they were all clinging together for dear life, snuffling and sputtering, with their noses pressed into his coat.

Two hours later they went far away, and the Lovely Summer became a sharp, poignant memory — then a fragile memory, time-dimmed and time-hallowed.

4

It was misty, with a slow drizzling rain.

The people on the docks were huddled under a swaying mass of black umbrellas. They were fluttering handkerchiefs, shouting out last-minute messages; and down on the lowest deck everybody seemed to be kissing and embracing everybody else.

'Good-bye — good-bye ——'

Little mewing birds swooping across the sky; luggage being hauled into the air, and plunged mysteriously into the ship's middle; late passengers scuttling up the gangplank; bells, and grinding noises, and the dull swush of the waves; and, through it all, that sound of kissing, that muttering sound of last farewells...

The Kiplings clung together, close to the rail, with their carpet-bags and their various paper bundles. The Duke, in honor of this tremendous event, had bought them all new hats — little round red ones, perched on the top of their heads and held on by loops of elastic under their chins; and they all wore flowers in their buttonholes, and carried penny flags. Their faces were wet with rain, their eyes were like saucers. They watched the luggage soaring over them, and watched the people kissing; they leaned forward a bit and stared through the railing at the sea, and at the mewing birds, and at the bobbing mass of black umbrellas.

No one had come to say good-bye to them. They stood silent, and strangely aloof, in the midst of this orgy of farewells....

Then there was a terrific blast of noise from the fog-horn, and all the people who weren't passengers wrenched themselves away from the people who were, and disembarked in a great hurry so as not to be carried off by mistake. There was a sudden commotion on board, a sudden sense of powerful activity: the gangplank was hauled up; orders were hurled through the air like cannon balls; there was a clanking sound of chains, a churning sound of water. The center of the deck was cleared now. Everybody had rushed to the sides, everybody was shouting and waving, or sniffling into their handkerchiefs — families moving *en masse* and bearing with them, like invisible baggage, all their family traditions and idiosyncrasies; nonchalant people; palpitating people; an elderly couple here and there, with an uprooted look on their faces...

A gigantic tremor ran through the ship; the churning sound deepened to a sort of roar. Then they began to move out, slowly, slowly.

The Kiplings stared through the railing, breathing very hard. The docks were sliding away from them in a most peculiar fashion; the faces of the people were growing blurred, they were little pale ovals, then pin-pricks, then nothing at all. 'Oh!' they said in hushed voices. '*Look!*' They could see a long line of shore now, and a chaotic stretch of water that kept on growing wider and wider. The mists made everything look pallid and ethereal, so that they might have been steaming away from a magic land, pearl-colored and wraith-like. They felt lumps in their throats, they began to flourish their penny flags a little wildly: 'Good-bye — good-bye!' Good-bye to Miss Wibblestress, to the orphans, to all the alleys and parks and gardens they had ever known...

And suddenly the Duke, charged with a terrific sense of loss, burst into a flood of tears. He threw his arm out, looking very noble and grief-stricken: 'There is your country!' he told them dramatically. 'Never forget her — never forget her!' His eyes were like blue fire, the tears poured down his cheeks.

And the Kiplings, more bewildered than distressed, clung to his long, thin legs and howled loudly and excitedly.

But at the end of several days they had all cheered up again; and the Duke, with his chin in the air, went swinging down the gangplank towards a city of towers; while the Kiplings, in their round red hats, bustled after him like a small parade.

They lived among the towers for a month or two, then they were off again, driven by the old wanderlust, the old thirst for color and adventure.

It was a hectic and vigorous life that they led, honeycombed with peril, but they managed to sail through it with astonishing success — for the Duke was a beguiling sort of gentleman gifted with the ability to adjust himself to multitudinous situations; and the Kiplings, instead of becoming bruised or coarsened by their various vagabond experiences, seemed to float delicately above them, living in an intimate world of their own which remained intact and inviolable wherever they might happen to be. The shifting pageantry of places and people fascinated, but never absorbed them; they belonged nowhere and to no one; they were wanderers — carrying within themselves, like a hidden jewel, a sense of sufficiency and completeness.

So they were blown about from city to city, as casually as leaves on a wind, until at last, with their battered baggage and their soiled red hats, they descended upon the Old Lady. They had three sprawling rooms high up under the roof, with walls that slanted in so many different directions that they were forever bumping their heads. From the windows, which jutted out from the slants in a rather pop-eyed fashion, they could watch the sun set behind the soaring spire of a church, and, in the evenings, could watch the lights of the city glittering sharply like fallen stars. And while they stared down, the Duke would sing to them, ballads and arias and the jolly odds-and-ends he was always making up himself:

'Oh, life is a joke and a game and song,
And we play it hard and we sing it long!
We laugh — laugh — laugh ——'

And: 'We laugh — laugh — laugh!' the Kiplings would chorus, pounding their fists on the narrow sill.

'We go this way, we go that,
We are a roving family!
Cairo — Bagdad — Timbuctoo,
Places old and places new.
'Rah! 'Rah! Put on your hat,
For we are a roving famil*ee!*'

And a favorite one with endless stanzas that each of them helped to make up:

'Joan is our friend,
Richard is our friend,
Wellington and Nelson and Henry of Navarre.
Drums on the air,
Flags against the sky:
Hail, friends! the Parade is going by...'

And sometimes, if they were all in the proper mood, there would be poems. The Duke was very good at poems, and they sounded especially effective when the wind was swushing through the sky outside and the rain was slurring over their roof.

Whenever he was inspired with a new one, he always wrote it out, with a great many flourishes and whirligigs, and sent it off to the editor of the most important magazine he could think of at the moment. (The idea of submitting it to an insignificant periodical never even seemed to occur to him.) And always, with humiliating promptness, the poem was returned to the bosom of the family.

The Kiplings at last became quite upset about it: 'Why?' they wished to know, suspecting some mysterious and evil forces at work to defraud the Duke of his rightful heritage of glory.

'Perhaps,' he suggested, ruffling his hair on end, 'it's because — to be brutally frank — they don't think they're any good!'

The children scoffed at such a notion. No good, indeed! They tore up the rejection slips, and made a number of very rash and scathing remarks about the editor tribe. For it was easier for them to assume that all the magazines in the land were controlled by donkeys and asses than to believe, for one moment, that the Duke wasn't a genuine poet.

Only Ricky went into the matter further. He thought about it, very seriously, when the Wind Poem was returned. The Wind Poem was beautiful to him; but if it was beautiful, why hadn't the editors wanted it? He felt, somehow, that this was a tremendously important question. He was puzzled by it; for a moment he was almost frightened, because, like a gust of wind wobbling a carefully builded tower of little blocks, it seemed to threaten with sudden chaos the simple orderliness of his ideas about the grown-up world. Perhaps, he suggested to himself, there were too many beautiful things, so that there weren't enough places for them all. But this sounded rather absurd. Or perhaps the same thing was never beautiful to different people. But the longer he held this in his thought, the more heavily freighted it seemed to be with complications; so that he grew confused and dismissed it, irritably, for another point. Perhaps he, Ricky, didn't really know what *was* beautiful! But this was worse still! It was something that had never occurred to him before. He felt dumbfounded — alarmed! Such a possibility, even if not fully accepted, wedged a way open for a little throng of disconcerting suggestions. Perhaps he was stupid; perhaps, after all, he wasn't going to be famous later on, wasn't going to do remarkable and dramatic things! Perhaps he would be nothing but a — postman! A garbage-man, even! Appalling thought! *Unthinkable* thought! He fled from it: he dashed out of the house and flung himself recklessly into a fight (one which he had been nervously evading for several weeks) with the Old Lady's nephew — a bulky, belligerent individual whom he despised with great bitterness because he had always been so desperately afraid of him. There was an interested audience, composed of two other boys, three shrieking little girls, and the janitor of the apartment building opposite; and the nephew, in due time, and much to his own and everybody else's astonishment, was made to lick the pavement in a gratifyingly servile fashion. Then Ricky swaggered home again, in a charming humor. His self-respect was reëstablished; his doubts dispelled. Obviously, as he had always suspected, he was a person to be reckoned with...

And the Duke, momentarily downcast at each rejection, always cheered up again.

'It's like this,' he explained. 'If they're printed — good! But the important thing is that you *thought* them — even if you couldn't get them written quite the same. As a matter of fact, if everybody thought them there wouldn't be any need to write them! D'you see?'

The children said 'Yes ——' vaguely.

'No, you don't!' the Duke crisply contradicted. 'And if you're going to tell lies I shan't explain things to you!'

They hurriedly confessed their ignorance, craved pardon, and requested enlightenment.

'That's better,' he said. 'If you don't understand something, speak up — and keep on speaking up until you do! I'd rather have you rude than hypocrites. Remember that!'

They gazed at him with the brightly attentive air of puppies waiting for a bone; but before he could advance to his next point there was a sudden clamor of fire-engines at the end of the street — and all of them, including the Duke, rose as one man and bolted down the stairs...

A little while after that there was a school play.

Mimsy and Poppet and Boots were in it; and for weeks they rushed around as excited and agitated as if they were preparing for a début of international importance.

Mimsy was an angel: she wore a long white nightgown and a silver star was pasted on her forehead. Robin was entranced: 'Oh, you are beautiful — you are beautiful!' It dawned upon her quite swiftly, the loveliness of Mimsy's fair hair, of Mimsy's delicate, ivory-colored face. She had never really noticed it before...

Poppet was a fairy. She wore a starched dress with paper frills and pink coral beads; and the Duke had fashioned her a pair of wings out of gauze and wire and tinsel which were strapped to her shoulders with several yards of tape. When she was ready, she stood in the middle of the table, poised on one foot, fluttering her thin arms up and down: 'Watch me! I'm flying — I'm flying!' And the beautiful wings swayed and sparkled...

Boots was a clown in pajamas decorated with black-and-orange pom-poms, and with a tall cardboard hat tilted over one eye. He was grave, and weighted down with a vast load of importance. 'Don't look so tragic,' the Duke advised. 'You're supposed to be frisky.' But Boots couldn't possibly have been frisky on such a tremendous occasion...

When the mushroom-colored curtain went up, with a series of great jerks and a grinding sort of noise, there was a blast of fond applause in the crowded hall, and a buzz of parental whispering:

'There's Norma ——'

'There's Helen ——'

'And there's Mimsy!' Robin discovered.

There was a sudden startling crash on a concealed piano, and the angels, strung out across the stage in a crooked line, burst promptly into song — their candles trembling a bit, but their voices straining determinedly to the highest note: 'Now upon this Christmuz Eve ——' They lost track of the music in the second stanza; and a harried-looking lady with a delicately purple nose thrust her head out of the wings for a moment, and tried to hiss them back into the strait and narrow way. The angels hesitated, nudged one another, and then rushed pell-mell to a loud and off-keyed finish. Under the cover of applause they darkly accused a certain little girl of leading them astray: 'You went too fast — you *did*, too!' And the little girl quivered with distress...

After that they marched around several times in what, to the uninitiated, seemed a rather aimless fashion; and then, with a great deal of shuffling and subdued muttering, they formed a small tight group in a corner of the stage. Some of them stood at attention as if they were going to be shot; and several others craned forward and made surreptitious signals to their families in the audience. But Mimsy sat quite rigid, staring at the ceiling — playing the part of an angel with everything she had in her.

This stirring scene was followed by an interlude, one of those long blank spaces wherein nothing happened, but you were acutely aware of the fact that something very shortly would — because of the various agitated sounds of preparation coming from behind the scenes, and because of the cardboard shrubs which were all trembling and swaying with an air of suppressed emotion. Bang! went the piano — then stopped abruptly. The angels were half-uneasy and half-elated at thus remaining the center of attraction: one of them giggled with excitement; another of them, having warded off the plebeian act as long as possible, whipped out a handkerchief and blew her nose...

'Ready!' a piercing whisper announced; and the audience brightened. There was a second crash on the piano, delivered with heartening assurance; and, as if they had been discharged from a gun, out shot a score of home-made fairies. They pranced across the stage, all keeping their eyes glued to a certain crack while the lady with the purple nose fed them instructions: 'One, two, *three*,' her voice sizzled through the music. 'To the left, to the right ——'

Wings fluttered gayly, tinsel and silver paper made a brave show — and what did it matter if Poppet's stocking had fallen to her ankle and her crown had slipped rakishly over one ear! 'Here we are, here we are — all the way from fairyland!' After a frightened moment or two, they could see her beginning to enjoy herself: her knees went straight up as she danced, her eyes were like black jewels. 'Watch me!' she was telling them. 'I am flying — I am really flying!'

In their excitement they rather miscalculated the depth of the platform, and their dance led them towards and eventually pitched them into a highly annoyed group of angels. 'Keep back! Keep back!' hissed various members of the heavenly kingdom, at the same time assuming wide, stationary smiles to assure the audience that all was well even if it didn't appear to be so. But the fairies were a dogged lot: they had learned their steps, and they finished their steps regardless of wrath and confusion. Then one little girl, upon being parted from her wings, burst into tears and had to be hurried off the stage by an unheralded individual in a serge suit and a plumed hat, who appeared momentarily and astonishingly under an arch of pink paper roses. And another little girl gushed into song at the wrong moment, and grew scarlet with grief and shame; and one of the angels crashed off her pedestal (a disguised grocery-box) and upset part of the scenery — thereby revealing the pianist in the act of refreshing herself with a glass of lemonade. But Poppet went right on being a fairy, as if she never intended to do anything else for the rest of her life...

After a while Boots came in with a rush, then faltered, and stared at the audience with a horrified face.

'Buck up, old chap!' the Duke directed.

And, 'Go on — go on!' Robin urged under her breath.

With an heroic effort he drew himself together and tramped about with the other small clowns — very red, very solemn, and overwhelmingly conscious of vast masses of people. His hat fell off once in the gyrations of a labored dance, and he stopped and rescued it while his partner nearly tripped over him, and everybody else became slightly confused. Then he turned to the left, when he should have turned to the right, and the lady with the purple nose made violent and intricate gestures with her arms, and Boots asked: '*Where?*' in a panic-stricken whisper...

Later on, in the middle of a scene, the curtain fell down by mistake, and a fairy, a butterfly, and three elves were parted from their fellows and left stranded in front of the audience with an air of bleak bewilderment. They stood rooted to one spot, their surprise quickly blackening into unutterable horror; then the curtain went grinding up again, and the rest of the company were revealed in attitudes of blank astonishment — their eyes popping, their mouths wide open. After that a little boy whistled 'Annie Laurie,' dropping an octave now and then when he found himself getting too high for comfort; and a little girl sang a solo, and fainted at the end of the second stanza — which remarkable feat plunged the entire cast into a state of wild excitement...

But in the end all the little complications and mishaps were smoothed away. The stage was crowded with children: angels at the back with their candles held high, fairies and elves and butterflies and clowns. Behind the dimmed lights they sang very softly: 'Noel — Noel ——' Their voices were sweet and thin, their eyes were shining with the supreme happiness of the moment.

A woman next to Robin drew her breath in sharply. Perhaps she had just glimpsed the terrible chasm...

'Noel — Noel —— 'the words soared through the hushed hall, and life seemed very simple and very good!

When it was all over, the young performers rushed to their respective families, eager for commendation. Nobody was nervous now — not a bit of it! While they were being wrapped into coats and shawls, they jabbered noisily and cockily about their parts: 'Did you see me with the King — did you hear me go away up ——' They felt rich with experience, giddy with triumph!

Boots flatly denied that he had ever wavered; and Poppet was quite upset at the suggestion that she had been scared: 'Of course I wasn't — *of course not!*' Her black eyes snapped indignantly.

'All right,' the Duke agreed. 'You were marvels of poise, and I was so proud of you that I clapped until my hands were numb!'

It was snowing when they left the school. The flakes fell, chill and wet, on their flushed cheeks and clung to their curling lashes. It was a fairy-tale world that they were moving through, silent and ethereal: the lamps at the corners glimmered frostily, the windows of the houses were soft orange blurs. There were stars somewhere, but they were lost in a white web, a moon-colored web, delicately and loosely spun...

Poppet danced along with a shawl pinned carefully over her wings. 'Wasn't it beautiful!' she kept on saying, her voice sharp and unsteady with excitement. Then another thought overwhelmed her: 'Why — it's over! *It's all over!*' And life seemed suddenly blank.

The next evening they opened the box in which were stored the Lovely Summer souvenirs, and to them they now added the silver star and the tall hat and the wings and the pom-poms:

'We can keep them for our children,' Mimsy said.

Poppet emphatically objected: 'Your children can have your star, but they can't have my wings!'

'But you won't want them when you're grown-up, Poppet.'

'I will, too!'

'What will you do with them?'

'Wear 'em, of course!'

'Oh, grown-ups *don't!*'

She stepped grandly over the objection. 'I'm going to be the kind of grown-up who *does!*'

Mimsy reflected for a moment. 'You'll change, you know. Everybody changes. Maybe you won't care about the wings then.'

Poppet was half-shocked and half-angry at such a suggestion. She didn't want to change — and most certainly she didn't want not to care about the wings. That would be dreadful, like losing yourself! 'I won't!' she shouted. 'I won't — I won't!' Then she lay on her stomach and pretended to study the pattern in the rug, but out of the corner of her eyes she was searching Robin's face. 'I won't have to — will I?' she asked.

'Of course not,' Robin said cheerfully. 'Even when we're frightfully old, we'll still be *us!*'

5

That winter they found a tremendous lot of things to do. In the daytime, of course, at school, most of their ideas were thoughtfully provided for them, so that activity was more or less restricted to accepting what was handed out and dutifully returning it on an examination paper; but in the evenings it was different. Life then became a richly interesting affair.

They played games, for instance: historical games, such as a stirring, if somewhat garbled, version of the trial of Marie Antoinette. And (with the exception of such works as were recommended by teachers) they read everything within sight — read voraciously, indiscriminately, with the zest of ones to whom each succeeding book was a vivid and intimate experience. Horatio Alger, 'Idylls of the King,' Captain Marryat, Kipling, all Boy Scout stories, Dickens, Shakespeare, Sherlock Holmes, 'Morte d'Arthur,' 'The Wizard of Oz' — they bounced about nimbly from the realistic to the fantastic, from the high-brow to the low-brow. And sometimes Ricky read the Bible: the Psalms, and bits of Isaiah. 'It's better than Tennyson,' he said. But he lost interest after a while, because they started having it in school — little slabs of it before the morning sessions, with the teacher keeping her eye on the clock to be sure that she didn't go on any longer than she was obliged to...

When books arrived at Christmas, or on birthdays, they often postponed the reading of them for days, sometimes for weeks. And there was one, 'The Arabian Nights,' that they didn't open for even longer. It was beautiful to look at, excitingly beautiful, with a fine blue cover brilliantly slashed with gold-and-crimson. 'Oh!' Mimsy said, 'let's save it for a long time — for a really long time!' For if they read it now, it would be all done with, it would be behind them, its mystery no longer a mystery. Some day, later on, they would open the fine blue covers, slowly, with exquisite delight; but not yet — not just yet, anyhow!

So they put it away on a shelf, hoarding it for a future hour...

And then there were other evenings when the Duke returned home with half a dozen theater tickets sticking up jauntily from under his hatband; and they would all scramble into their best clothes and thunder out of the house, conveying the impression that they were desperately late — when, as a matter of fact, they invariably arrived a full thirty minutes before the performance. They would sit in the second balcony, so high up that they never saw the top part of the sets, and rarely heard the curtain speeches. They would give rapt attention to everything that went on, taking turns in staring through a tremendous pair of field-glasses (twenty-five cents at a rummage sale) which they fondly believed to work miracles in the way of clarifying and magnifying the scene; and now and then they so far forgot themselves as to lean forward and jeer at the villain, or warn the heroine, distressingly slow-witted at times, that the gentle man with the spats wasn't all that he pretended to be.

Until 'Cyrano de Bergerac' came to town, they supposed that there was nothing on earth quite so enchanting as the Gilbert and Sullivan operas. They knew most of the 'Pinafore' songs, and all the 'Mikado' ones, from the opening chorus to the finale; so that when they went to hear them they were apt to join in with the singers on the other side of the footlights — very softly, of course, but seldom softly enough to escape the attention of the ushers. Then Cyrano arrived! They sat perfectly rigid in their seats, their hands screwed together, their hearts nearly bursting with emotion. Such brave speeches, such rich and glamorous beauty — it was almost too much for them! Once the Duke said, 'It's all right, you know — it's just a play.' But the words clanked down, empty, meaningless. Dear Cyrano — wonderful, gallant, beloved Cyrano! They adored him; they yearned to be his champion and comforter, to gather up every bit of happiness in the world and fling it at his feet. When the curtain fell on the last act, they took a deep, sobbing breath. They felt that it would be impossible for them ever to go back to their ordinary lives. Nothing could be the same again. They walked home silently, in a sort of trance, with rapt and tear-stained faces...

One week they bought an expensive ticket in the front part of the orchestra. It was a surprise for Mimsy, and the others, in a great spurt of self-denial, were staying at home so that she could have it. For Mimsy was always wishing that she might sit with the fine people, the dressed-up people with their fashionable airs and graces. 'Oh, I'd love to, just once — just *once!*'

So they made quite a ceremony of the presentation:

'See, Mimsy — in the seventh row!'

She was properly elated until a sudden slivver of suspicion ran through her pleasure: 'What about the rest of you?'

'Oh — we're not going this week.'

'Why?'

'Because there isn't any more money,' said Poppet, who was candid rather than tactful.

'You mean — you spent it all for me?'

They fidgeted a bit, with the self-conscious air of those who fear that they are about to be accused of having acted nobly.

Then Mimsy did a strange and capricious thing. She grew red with anger. 'You think I'm like *that!* You think I'll go and sit in the best seat while you stay at home! Well, I won't — see!' And she tore up the ticket, threw it on the floor, and stamped on it with a bang. '*There!*'

It was dramatic; it was exciting; it was a gesture after the Kiplings' own hearts. They hugged Mimsy, and spent an hilarious evening together; and the next day, when Robin swept up the bits of pink ticket, it never even occurred to her that she was sweeping up money...

Boots had a birthday in early summer, and the Duke took them all for a boat-ride to a distant beach. It was very cheerful there: gold and sapphire, with a brisk salty wind blowing off the sea, and fat silver clouds in the sky. But it was a rather exclusive beach; and the Kiplings, with their lunch-boxes and their sweaters and their gaudy balloons, didn't seem to find favor in the eyes of the immaculate gentleman who guarded the entrance.

'Oh, very well!' the Duke said lightly. 'If you have no objection, we'll seat our humble selves on yonder rocks.' So they sat down on the rocks and gazed across a stout wall at the privileged individuals on the sands.

'Who are they?' Boots wished to know.

The Duke shrugged his shoulders. 'People who take themselves seriously,' he suggested. 'Did any one remember to bring the can-opener ——'

The sea was blue near the shore, then purple, then a brilliant green: three distinct sheets of color that neither merged nor wavered. The wind slapped against their faces; the sun flashed above them and sent spinning darts of gold into the water. It was very beautiful.

Ricky, sprawled out on his stomach, felt a sharp pang of ecstasy run through him. He began to play a sort of game that he had often played in secret, ever since the enchanted hours of the Lovely Summer: 'The way the sky slides into the sea is beautiful,' he thought. 'And the sound of the sea is beautiful, and the rocks against the sky, and the grass against the rocks ——' These were things that he was sure of, things that satisfied him completely. The hot flare of sunshine, the shimmering foam, the white sails, fragile as moths' wings, limned against the horizon. These were perfect things, which brought to him great happiness — and the ache, the subtle pain, that was a part of happiness.

Mimsy's hair was blowing in the wind, pale gold against bright blue. That was beautiful, too — but in a different way, just as the curve of Robin's arm, flung above her head, was beautiful, and the figure of Poppet, in a daffodil-colored dress, moving before the sea, and the picture that Boots made stooping beside a green pool in the rocks. But these things didn't touch him so profoundly, so intimately, as the vast radiance of the sky, the rhythmic march of a thousand glossy waves — all the flawless and impersonal loveliness to which he felt peculiarly attuned. Beauty such as this was neither static nor limited; the more he acquainted himself with it, the richer he perceived it to be. But when he came to consider people, there was a difference. Their beauty was fragmentary, quixotic, subject to time and mood and artificial framing. It interested him, sometimes it excited him — and he would stare and stare, with an odd clutching feeling in his throat. But it never satisfied his demands for perfection, for infinite variety; and after a while his wonder would wilt into matter-of-fact admiration…

He turned his head a bit and studied Mimsy. She was all gold-and-ivory beside the sea. She was beautiful—but if you looked too closely there was a pimple on her chin, and the wind, which was throwing her hair back in a lovely way, had made her nose red. Little things — stupid, spoiling little things! He rolled over on his back and stared up and up through the bright air. Showers of hot sunshine fell against his face; the sky rose domelike over the sea, so pure, so radiant, that he caught his breath. 'This,' he said to himself, 'is the most beautiful moment in the world!' He was exquisitely aware of it; his heart was like a quiet pool mirroring every movement, every shade and shimmer…

After lunch they boarded another boat from the end of the wobbly wharf. It was a small launch, and they sat on the roof of the cabin and dangled their legs, while the spray rushed up towards them in a cloud of stinging silver. The second beach proved to be decidedly more cordial than the first, and, in the adjacent park, they spent a lavish portion of the next week's rent in honor of the occasion. Boots rode on the merry-go-round until he was hopelessly dizzy and had to be supported through the crowds. 'Everything — looks — so *queer!*' he observed in a wavering sort of voice. And, 'I don't doubt it!' the Duke remarked. Then Mimsy, urged on by the others, tried the water-chute; but she was so distressed coming down that she turned an alarming pale green color. They made her sit on a bench afterwards and drink a bottle of soda-pop. 'Were you terribly scared, Mimsy?' they inquired solicitously — as if they had taken every precaution to spare her so harrowing an experience. 'Oh, it was awful!' she declared in a stricken voice. 'I thought I'd *die!*' And after that Poppet created quite a sensation by smuggling a small borrowed dog, named Elsie, on to the Ferris-wheel, and bouncing up and down with her on the seat with an air of blithe bravado. 'Be careful, little girl!' nervous ladies shrieked, as she swooped down towards the earth; but the little girl only beamed at them, and tried to comfort Elsie, who looked vaguely upset. Then Ricky threw something at something else and won, much to every one's astonishment, a huge beribboned doll. 'Oh!' he said blankly. 'Here, take the thing! I don't want it!' So Mimsy held it in the crook of her arm, rocking it a little now and then...

Late in the afternoon they wandered down to the beach again, sailing their balloons over their shoulders. It was quite different now. Most of the people had left, and the radiance of the day had mellowed into a softer, a more tranquil beauty: the clouds had grown rich with color, the sea had grown smooth with peace. Gulls veered across the sunset, shining and ethereal, like birds from another world; they made lovely arcs of motion, they gave poignancy to the vast solitudes of the sky.

The Kiplings threw themselves flat on the sand, their faces luminous in the golden light. For a while they were content to lie there, neither talking nor thinking — only conscious, in a deep, warm fashion, of the fluid grace of the distant dunes, of the slow rhythm of the waves, of the crest of grasses, shifting from silver to amber, on the ridge above their heads. Then Boots licked his finger and discovered that it was salty, so the Duke had to explain: 'It's because the very first Duchess of Monmouth was a mermaid — it isn't spoken of much in the family, but it's true just the same — and every time one of her descendants happens to wander near the shore, something inside of him responds to the sea, and he begins to taste a bit different...'

And after that Poppet had a bright idea: 'Let's send our balloons across the ocean!'

'And tie messages to them!' Boots suggested.

That was quite an inspiration — but: 'What shall we say, and who shall we send them to?'

Robin thought for a moment. 'To Valhalla,' she suggested. 'And we can write "Hail!" — to the people in the Parade, you know.'

'Very good,' the Duke applauded. 'And send them my love — if it's being done this season.'

So they scribbled their messages and tied the bits of paper on to the balloons; then, flying them over their shoulders, they ran across the deserted beach to the rim of the sea. It was a lovely moment: the waves slid towards them, dark and glossy and frilling at last into lacelike foam; and all above them there were great sheets of color, shifting and deepening...

'Now!' cried Robin; and they flung their balloons up and watched them sail into the sky, falteringly at first, then swifter — swifter — mounting like multicolored bubbles until they were quite lost.

The Kiplings stood there together, motionless, looking up, with silver birds veering above their heads...

When the first star came out, they went back to the pier and took the boat for home. After the brisk winds and the flaring sunshine of the day, everything seemed to be fashioned from the stuff of dreams, to be darkly luminous and very still. A full moon came up over the water, flat and pumpkin-colored; and now and then people sang snatches of songs, their voices sounding extraordinarily clear on the night air.

Robin cupped her chin in her hands, and leaned forward. She stared around her — at things, at people. She stared at Ricky's face, a thin, inscrutable face outlined against a shower of stars. She wondered what he was thinking, standing so aloof there by the deck railing; she wondered if he was feeling the same way that she was feeling. The still night beauty troubled her; she was confused before it, and wistful; she was caught in a web of emotions that she couldn't understand. Just lately this had been happening. Was it because she was growing up? It was a queer thing, growing up, so much more complicated than she had supposed it would be. Once it had seemed quite simple, in the pleasant, remote way that so many things had seemed simple: you grew up, everybody did — you stopped being a child, stopped going to school, stopped wearing hats with ribbon streamers. Somehow, she had expected it all to happen very swiftly and very decisively. But it hadn't. Instead there were a multitude of uncertainties; there were fumblings back and forth, moments when she felt terribly young, and other moments when she didn't feel young at all. But nobody talked to her about this; nobody seemed to be aware of how tremendously exciting and disturbing life had suddenly become...

Childhood was just a brief distance behind, like a walled garden, shining in the sun, shimmering in the rain; but dimly she sensed that it would be open to her for only a little while longer. Each time she returned to it, bewildered by the complexity of what lay ahead, its doors were harder to find. Soon, perhaps, there would be no going back...

She shifted a little, uneasily. 'Ricky ——'

He looked up. 'Yes, Robin?'

She wanted to tell him about it, to make herself quite plain: 'Do you ever feel — *queer*, Ricky?'

His face was secret against the stars. 'Sometimes,' he said.

She was conscious of a certain wariness in his tone. Ricky was always so careful, so evasive, when you tried to question him; he never turned his heart inside-out, he never thrust his thoughts on display. Instead you had to wait for them, catching a sudden clear glimpse now and then through narrow cracks in his reticence.

'Why do you suppose it is?' she asked.

'Oh, I don't know ——' He sounded embarrassed. He hated talking about intimate things, secret things; he would rather have died than have had his feelings mauled over by other people.

'Perhaps ——' There was a swift rush of words in Robin's head, eager and agitated. 'Perhaps ——'

But Ricky had turned away.

For a moment she felt frustrated, baffled; and all the eager words fell cold and dead. Then she remembered that Ricky was two years younger. Perhaps he had never been outside those garden walls, perhaps he had never been troubled with doubts and fears, with all the little shifting moods that harassed her. That must be it. He was safe, he and Mimsy and the rest of them, while she was wandering off alone, driven by something that she could neither combat nor understand.

And suddenly Robin wanted to be with them again, simply and wholly, as she once had been. 'I won't grow up!' she cried to herself. 'Not for ages — and ages!' And she felt as if she were flying, fleeing, back to the garden of sun and rain...

6

When autumn swung round again, with its bronze leaves and its blue mists, the Duke developed a taste for higher education and rushed the Kiplings off to every free lecture that the city afforded. They listened to violent political harangues, to rhapsodic orations on music and art; they heard wan authors tell how it was done, and lady poets bare their souls in astonishing bursts of candor. They knew just why America should go into the war, and just why it shouldn't; and they acquired a colorful (although somewhat confused) conception of the natural wonders of the earth and the sky. They always stood in a queue afterwards and shook hands with the speaker of the occasion, and told him their names and thanked him for his talk. Sometimes they took exception, politely but firmly, to certain opinions he had voiced; and once Poppet pulled a handkerchief out of an author's pocket and brought it home triumphantly as a souvenir. (But the Duke made her send it back in an envelope — not that he favored the author particularly, but he felt it would be better for Poppet's morals...)

The Duke himself, after a period of comparative tranquillity, had again fallen prey to the pangs of restlessness. But this time they were deeper and more complex, bred not so much of the old wanderlust as of a sudden mental awakening.

Probably the electric atmosphere of the times had something to do with it — at any rate, he began to think about himself, and about life in general, with a seriousness that was fatal to his peace of mind.

He reviewed his career, and wondered if its jauntiness justified its obvious lack of purpose; he reviewed himself — and saw that self suddenly limned, with stark clarity, as a waster against a background of failures. Colorful failures, to be sure; but it was a rather shocking picture just the same. He began to consider other people: how admirably they struggled, how laudably they labored to become presidents of banks and directors of steel corporations. Personally, he had no desire to be either the president of a bank or the director of a steel corporation (indeed, they struck him as being peculiarly disagreeable ways of spending one's life!); but he recognized, and, in his present frame of mind, paid homage to the fact that both positions spelled achievement. And achievement, hard and definite, was something that he had always seemed to miss.

He wondered what he might have done — instead of what he had done — if he had only thought of it at the proper moment. He racked his brains for talents that hadn't been utilized, for opportunities that hadn't been snatched; but the only talent he possessed seemed to be one for enjoying himself, spiritedly, debonairly; and he couldn't remember ever having overlooked an opportunity, however slight, that pointed towards adventure. But all the same, it had got him nowhere; and, in the last analysis, he was nothing but a vagabond, a singer of ditties, a spinner of verses that never sold...

'I am a failure!' he declared, a bit dramatically — because, in spite of what he conceived to be overwhelming anguish of spirit, he couldn't help relishing the poignancy of his position. The man who had dreamed brave dreams, who had meant to flash across the world leaving a glittering trail behind him — it was very sad!

'I am a failure!' he repeated, and supposed, under the circumstances, that his heart was practically broken.

He needed the girl to bolster him up, to tell him that he was a fine fellow, to assure him that happiness was a greater achievement than success. But the girl wasn't there; and the Kiplings were so thoroughly convinced that the Duke was invincible that it would never have occurred to them to tell him so...

Then, quite suddenly, his salvation came. The war loomed up — a shining goal. He had considered it before, but had never progressed beyond the barrier raised by the Kiplings. Now he went forward, swiftly, tersely: Could they be left? Why couldn't they? Of course they could! And when he had vaulted them he marveled that he hadn't done it sooner. They would be all right, they were a spunky lot. Of course they would be all right! And he — he was himself again, alert and fired with enthusiasm. More than that, he was conscious of an inward glow that comforted and satisfied his heart, for after years of wandering, years of dallying, he felt that at last he had embraced a cause...

For a while the Kiplings scarcely grasped the full import of his decision. Then they accepted it philosophically. The Duke was always doing spectacular and reckless things, and was always coming through with flying colors — so the war would be the same, of course, and after it was over there would be another glittering link to add to the chain of his adventures: 'Sir,' said the General, 'in the name of France I thank you for the great service you have rendered us this day...'

They resolutely stamped out all spurts of fear, banding themselves together, secretly, wordlessly, and with a sort of unconscious chivalry, to assure the Duke that everything would be all right. Their confidence was flourished with such unflagging vigor that one would have supposed he was about to wander off, vacation fashion, to the most charming spot on earth — except that they were proud as well as confident, having, mentally, already established him as the distinguished hero of a variety of situations more picturesque than probable. The starkness of the war was veiled from them by bright mists of glamour: bugles — flags — prancing cavalry — airplanes like birds against the sun — gallant deeds and decorations and victories — splendid, inevitable victories! Of course the Duke would have to go! A little wistfully they envied him so wonderful a privilege...

Before he went away, Robin was given control of the Money-in-the-Bank.

'I'll send you what I can,' he told them crisply, 'and you're to draw on this when you have to. Don't splash it, but get everything you need. Have a show now and then — you'd better look up the reviews beforehand so you'll know what you're drawing. And you can get books out on my library card. It's behind the teapot. But remember to take them back, and don't smarm jam all over them — people object! You'd better try Conrad soon, you'll like him; and keep on going to the lectures — they're good for you — but don't believe everything they say!' He paused and stared down at the row of Kiplings, and the Kiplings stared back at him — at his thin, vivid face, his narrow eyes, his laughing mouth curved into grave lines now.

'You'll look after one another, won't you?'

'Oh, *rather!*'

'Who'll make the porridge?'

'I will,' said Mimsy in the solemn tone of one offering herself for a living sacrifice.

'All right. Stir it well, or it gets lumpy. And you'd each better darn your own stockings.'

'I'll darn everybody's!' Poppet volunteered dashingly.

'Very noble!' the Duke acknowledged. 'But your darns, as I remember them, are a bit mountainous.'

She was disappointed; so, 'You can put the saucepans under the leaks when it rains,' he suggested. 'That's much more romantic.'

'Thank you,' she said.

'And Boots ——'

'Yes?' panted Boots eagerly.

'No fairy-tales at school, old chap.'

'Oh, *no!*' he promised, with the fervent air of one resolved to lead a blameless life.

'And Ricky — you might feed Archibald.' (Archibald was a portly pigeon who spent most of his leisure moments on the back window-sill.)

'I will,' Ricky said — although he thought Archibald rather a fool.

'And Robin — see that everybody gets a bath now and then.'

She nodded; and the Duke ran his eye over their faces, all of them a bit guarded-looking, a bit flushed. 'You're not scared?' he asked.

Very elaborately, very volubly, they pooh-poohed such a notion.

'Just so!' he agreed. 'And if the Old Lady, or any one else, starts plastering you with mush — kick them out!'

'Kick them out!' Poppet repeated brightly.

'That,' he elucidated, 'is called a figure of speech.' He paused for a moment, wrinkling his brow. There was evidently something further he wished to say to them, something important. A father's Last Word to his family. 'Look here,' he began, 'you'll keep on enjoying yourselves, won't you? Have a good time — games — all that sort of thing! Don't get *gloomy!*'

Robin made a sort of pledge: 'We won't — ever! None of us!'

He leaned foward a bit, and a banner of yellow sunshine fluttered across his face. '*Don't!*' he said gravely. 'It's such a — bore!'

They clung to the Duke for a few moments, but nobody kissed him (it would never have occurred to them to do so) and nobody cried, although Boots turned a dull red, which meant that he felt it coming. Then they marched downstairs together, smiling bright, set smiles. The Duke was going away, he was a soldier now, he belonged to a gallant company: Richard, Wellington, the Black Prince, knights with plumes and silver armor. They stood in the doorway, waving, until the twilight had swallowed him up — a tall, shabby figure going forward, with incorrigible buoyancy, to meet another adventure.

When they stumbled up to the attic again, feeling suddenly forlorn, they found five theater tickets and a box of chocolates on the table...

The months slid past, and everything went on very much as usual — except that there was no Robespierre when they played Marie Antoinette, and no ballads when they leaned across the window-sills and watched the city lights. Then one day, in spring, a notice came for Robin. It stated, briefly, that the Duke had done something, something wonderful: '— superb courage; exceedingly proud of him ——'

But the Duke of Monmouth would never come back.

7

In the evenings, Robin remembered, when they looked out upon it, this was a lovely place — mysterious — the city of fallen stars. But none of Ricky's pieces belonged to it now; none of the fine tales they had woven together. Instead, it loomed up about her harsh with reality: gray stone, cold, glittering windows, a multitude of strangers with casual eyes...

She bumped against a woman, and the woman said something in a stabbing voice. 'Sorry ——' Robin mumbled, and fled under an archway, feeling as if she had been struck, feeling cowed and confused and abandoned. The gigantic indifference of the city gathered force and overwhelmed her, all in a moment. Nobody cared what happened to the Kiplings. She was staggered at the enormity of that. *Nobody cared!* Boots might be taken away, and then Mimsy, and then Poppet, but none of these people — this woman with the brown fur, this man with the white beard — none of them would mind, none of them would be even interested!

She stood there, watching them, utter desolation sweeping through her like a wind. She wondered what would happen if she were suddenly to hold her hands out, to cry: 'Listen! You have got to listen to me! There are five of us, and we're all by ourselves. We don't know what to do — how to stay together! Can't you tell us? Can't you help us?' Why couldn't she say that? Why would it be stupid? Why weren't people able to act simply towards each other?

For a moment the plight of the Kiplings was transcended by an infinitely older problem. Her eyes smarted with tears because life was so baffling, when it might have been so plain.

After a while she wandered into the park and sat down near the pond. The sunshine was delicate here, the grass cool and green. It carried her back poignantly to the Lovely Summer, to that time of quiet beauty and golden peace. *Tall grass in the poppy-field, warm grass, wet grass...grass under the larches, as soft as moss.* If only they could return to it, escaping from this perilous life that threatened them with defeat. *Blue shadows in the pine copse...the sun-dappled garden...dusk flowing, flowing, over the calm-curved Downs.* If only they could all get back to it, somehow, in some way — hiding themselves in the kind grass, losing themselves in the friendly trees. Miss Wibblestress was too vague a figure to reach towards now, and there was nobody else to whom they could turn; there was nothing anywhere in the whole world that offered comfort but that quiet beauty, that golden peace. It seemed so very urgent that she felt as if she could close her eyes and force herself across the chasm of the years: 'I am going to wake up in the Lovely Summer — I am going to — I am going to!' But it was only the park that lay before her; everything else was spent, irretrievable.

Robin was shaken with the despair of youth — brief, and so piercingly sharp in its brevity. Happiness seemed shattered into a thousand fragments, the fires of hope seemed burned out utterly. Boots would be taken away, then the others would go, one by one, and all their dreams would be scattered on a careless wind...

Her thoughts went back, trudgingly, to the evening before. The Old Lady's parlor, full of china ornaments and bandy-legged furniture. Books that nobody read — pink roses, blatantly artificial. And the Old Lady herself, with her corset-lacings outlined through her dress like criss-cross ribs terminating in a sort of shelf. A sizzle of officious greetings: '— and this is Mrs. Blodgett.' Mrs. Blodgett, a squat, prominent-eyed woman with a heavy mustache. Mrs. Blodgett smiling — a wide, hortatory smile that turned her face into a ruin of wrinkles. She had been talking Things over with dear Mrs. Lunce (great wags of confirmation from the Old Lady); she had been thinking very Earnestly (it was quite an effort, one gathered); and she had come to the Conclusion that she would adopt Boots. Yes, dear, Adopt him! She had always (with a momentary hint of excitement that was rather appealing) wanted a little boy. She had seen Boots playing in the street. She had watched him out of her window...

The sallow lamplight making her face look grotesque against the flowered wall-paper. The mustache a dirty smudge across her lip — why didn't she shave it off, why didn't she *do* something about it! If she kissed Boots, the mustache would touch his face...

And she had a sister in Chicago who might take Mimsy. She would give her a Home, dear, in return for Services. It sounded rather ominous. And perhaps the sister had a mustache. Mimsy would scream — Mimsy who moved in loveliness...

The Old Lady (who had moulded the lives of four wan and pliable daughters) bulging with satisfaction. 'In your sad position ——' Tears in Mrs. Blodgett's eyes, glittering tremendously like bubbles. 'Now that your father is dead ——' The words striking her, all over again, with a sort of dull amazement.

Then more jabbering back and forth in the sallow light:

Boots here, Mimsy somewhere else, a place for Poppet, perhaps, at the ends of the earth — the Kiplings who had nothing but one another, the Kiplings who were bound together tightly, *tightly!* And all of a sudden her furious rejection: 'How dare you — how dare you ——' And the Old Lady's bright air of achievement steeling itself quickly into something else...

'What is there for us to do?' Robin cried. 'What is there!' But, although she thought that she was embracing defeat, there was something deep within her standing against it.

After a while the spasm of fear passed, and she began to notice a figure at the other end of the bench. It gathered shape and meaning slowly through a mist of tears: an old man, sprawled back, with sealed eyes and lax hands and a face that was emptied of all expression. The sunshine streamed over him; a sparrow wheeled down and perched on his shoulder. Never before had Robin come across anything so utterly beaten. It was more than unhappiness. Her own desolation seemed negligible beside it — the shadow of a leaf beside the shadow of a tree. Poor old man! It hurt her to look at him, it filled her with a swift, keen pity. She wanted to lean over and pat his hand, gently, kindly, and say: 'Please try to buck up! Please try to smile!' Well, why not? She hesitated for a moment, and then touched his sleeve:

'Old man ——'

He was silent and still.

She spoke to him again: 'It's spring — look!'

But he never moved.

She stared at him, her fingers laced together in her lap; and suddenly he loomed out in her thought as a sort of challenge. He, at one end of the bench, had admitted failure; and she, at the other end, was on the verge of doing the same! The idea shocked her into a vigorous protest: 'I won't!' said Robin aloud. '*I won't!*' And that something, deep within, asserted itself, became strong and all-powerful. A few moments before her youth had seemed a burden; but now it was a sword, a staff, a high-flung flag. 'I'll never be like that —

never!' Fiercely she pledged herself against defeat. Never would the Kiplings fall down utterly, never would they lie with drums stilled and banners lost...

How stupid to have stood among the shadows, crying for help! The Duke would have been aghast at such cowardice: 'What does this mean, Robin — sniffling as soon as you're put on your own!' And the girl would have been filled with disappointment: 'Don't you remember how I waved to you, Robin, and told you that all was well!'

'Oh, I'm sorry — I'm sorry!' Robin cried. 'I promise you I won't do it again!' She got up and plunged her hands into her pockets. The Kiplings weren't beaten — not yet! They'd show these people a thing or two! She felt spurred and inspirited by her heritage of courage; and the future towered ahead, a golden hill to be scaled, with its summit shrouded in radiant mists...

The bell of the corner church had just jangled out the quarter-hour when she saw the sign in the basement window

'Four Rooms To Let.'

Robin was arrested by the words; she stood in front of the house, reading them over and over. Four rooms in a basement — four rooms hidden away from the Old Lady, safe from the squat woman who wanted Boots. She walked off towards the avenue, and then came back again with a rush, her hesitations suddenly crystallized into action...

The door was opened by a lank, lackadaisical person, whose bristling eyebrows stood guard over a most inoffensive face. 'Hello,' she said affably.

Robin plunged into business: 'Please — are you the lady of the house?'

'God forbid,' said the lank person pleasantly. She made an airy gesture with her arm: 'Third room on the left. Don't trip on the carpet — it's loose — and if she's asleep, come into the parlor and wait.'

The door thudded behind her, and Robin fumbled her way down the hall. Instinctively she recognized the atmosphere of the place: that familiar dinnery smell; that curious lack of individuality blended with a subtle feeling of many people coming and going, of many people working out, under the same roof, utterly dissimilar patterns of life. The reception-room, heterogeneously furnished; the dining-room, with a fattish girl in a print dress clearing away a clutter of dishes. Then the third door. When she entered it everything became suddenly confused. Her knees wobbled — the windows spun round. 'What am I doing here?' she thought, panic-stricken. 'What did I come for?' Then a voice boomed out, and the swimming blurs gradually steadied themselves into recognizable objects.

She saw, dimly, a large figure on a sofa, with a lollipop in one hand and a magazine in the other.

'Sit down, sit down,' commanded the voice.

She dropped into the nearest chair, and screwed her hands together tightly.

'Well — what do you want?'

'I've come to see about your rooms,' Robin began — and the words sounded thin and strange, like pennies clattering down. 'If they're not too much I'd like to take them.'

The large woman sucked her lollipop for a moment or two. 'M'name's McMasters,' she announced. 'Alfecia McMasters.'

'Thank you. Mine's Kipling.'

'Well, are you taking them by yourself?'

'No. There are five of us.'

'Your family, you mean?'

'Yes'm.'

'Do your parents always let you do the picking?'

Robin hesitated. 'I — I *have* to.'

'Why?'

'They aren't here?'

'Where are they?'

'They're — *you* know!' Impossible to say those words, impossible to say something you couldn't believe...

'Oh!' She put the candy into her mouth, and then pulled it out again with a slight pop. 'What are the rest of you like?'

'Oh, they're fine — you'd like them — I know you would!'

'I mean their ages?'

'The youngest is ten — the oldest fifteen.'

Mrs. McMasters's pale brows flew together. 'And you're roaming round by yourselves?'

Robin felt herself sliding back into a slough of fear. 'Yes —' she said sharply.

'But, my golly, you can't do that!'

'We've *got* to do it!'

'Where are the rest of your people?'

'We haven't any.'

'None at all?'

'None at all.' She shivered a little.

'And how long have you been alone?'

'Nearly five weeks.'

'And where've you been?'

Robin was silent for a moment; and then she suddenly leaned forward and stared at the woman on the sofa — stared at the fat face with its drooping cheeks and small, shrewd eyes. Would she understand, would she see how terribly important this was? The small eyes looked back at her, interested, questioning. There was none of the Old Lady's beaming complacency about them; they were cool, and rather kind behind their coolness...

Something seemed to snap within Robin, and she felt a swift sense of relief. Without doubting the impulse, she went over and knelt at the side of the sofa, and took one of Mrs. McMasters's pale, flabby hands in hers. 'Listen!' she said, and her voice was passionate and intense now — just as it was when she played the part of Marie Antoinette and pleaded for the Dauphin's life. 'Listen — you've got to listen to me! They're trying to divide us, and they *mustn't*, do you understand! Whatever happens we've got to stick together. The Duke — our father — was killed last month. It was wonderful — we're going to get his medal — everybody's proud of him, it said. He left us by ourselves because he thought he was coming back. And we've got to get away from the Old Lady — we're living in her house now, and she's trying to divide us. And another woman — she wants Boots. We've got enough money for the summer — and we'll do things — *anything!* If you'll let us come and live in your basement, I promise you, on my honor, we won't be any trouble! And if we can't keep ourselves after the money's gone, we'll go away — I promise you — I promise you ——' She went on and on in a torrent of words; and Mrs. McMasters sucked her lollipop and listened calmly.

'We're going to do wonderful things — all of us! You ought to hear Ricky's pieces! And Mimsy — and Poppet —— We just want a chance now, while we're beginning! You will help us, won't you — won't you!' Her face was white, her eyes were dark with anxiety, for all the future of the Kiplings seemed at stake. 'You'll be proud of us later on —— Oh, please — *please* ——'

There was a pause, and she felt the silence swing back on her like something tangible. Then Mrs. McMasters sat up straight against the plush cushions and slammed the lollipop into the magazine. 'By golly, I will!' she said.

Robin's chin went out; she was glowing, triumphant: 'You just watch us!' she cried. 'We're not going to be beaten ——' And then she pressed her head against the sofa, and sobbed a trifle wildly.

Mrs. McMasters patted her with little display of emotion. 'Cheer up,' she advised, 'and thank your lucky stars you didn't go next door. She's a nice woman, but not exactly fanciful — she'd have turned you over to the police probably!' She licked the candy again, a long, thoughtful lick. 'They're rummy little rooms, so you can have them for a dollar during the summer. I don't care — it doesn't make any difference to me. And some of you can come up and work in my place. You have to work hard and you have to work well — if not, out you'll go!'

Robin grew quieter, and wiped her nose on the sofa cover.

'When do you want to move?'

'Right away — please.'

'To-morrow. Got any furniture?'

'Yes, thank you.'

'What's your old she-dragon called?'

'Mrs. Lunce.'

'Ridiculous name! Give her my compliments, and tell her if she tries to interfere, I'll adopt the lot of you. Understand?'

'Yes'm.'

'All right. That's settled. I'll get the place cleaned for you in the morning — don't interrupt me — and you and the rest of the outfit can trot over in the afternoon. D'you know how to pack?'

'Of course! We've done it all our lives!'

'That so?'

Robin sat back on her heels. 'We go this way, we go that — we are a roving family!' She laughed; and then looked rather surprised. 'I can laugh,' she said gravely. 'And in the park I thought I'd die.'

'Quite a lot of people,' Mrs. McMasters observed, 'think that. But they don't.' She sat still for a moment, staring at Robin — probing her with little points of curiosity. 'I suppose I'll soon be sorry that I did this.'

'I promise that you shan't! I promise!'

She shrugged her shoulders. 'Perhaps — and perhaps not.'

'But aren't you going to believe in us?'

The fat face was impassive, inscrutable: only the eyes showed a flicker of interest.

'Just a little!' Robin pleaded.

'I'll watch,' Mrs. McMasters said. 'And good luck.' Then her voice suddenly changed: its beauty became sharpened into a sort of deliberate rowdiness. 'You can clear off now and pack your stuff — and tell your family that if they don't behave themselves they'll be turned into the street. I'll give you a chance, but I'll stand no nonsense. Is that understood? Very well! Good-bye.' She flourished a pudgy hand, and plugged the lollipop into her mouth again...

Robin, radiant-eyed, went marching down the hall.

Nobody knew where they were bound for, or how they were going — but the Kiplings, at any rate, were on their way!

PART TWO

TIME OF MISTS AND STARS

PART TWO

TIME OF MISTS AND STARS

I

Everything in the basement was being painted: the old chest of drawers a pumpkin yellow, the window-sills green, the table and the battered collection of chairs a nice showy blue that stood out, with gratifying vividness, against the plaster walls. For a little while such a burst of color rather went to the Kiplings' heads. Their brushes swept back and forth, dashingly, indiscriminately, licking up drabness and sliding over scars. It was wonderful! They felt amazed that beauty could be purchased so cheaply...

Later on they would tack up all their pictures, a hodgepodge assortment that they had carried about with them loyally from place to place. There was Poppet's favorite: a group of Roundheads leaning across a tremendous table and saying 'Where is your father?' to a proud little boy in a satin suit. And Robin's favorite: a company of knights cantering through a green-and-russet forest with the sunshine striking their armor like golden spears. Sir Brian, Sir Richard — all the gentlemen had names and splendid histories; for years she had known them, for years she had spun about them an endless odyssey of adventures. And there was the one that Ricky loved: tall, tall hills in the twilight, mauve and blue and black. It was unutterably lonely. When he looked at it he felt as if he were being drawn millions of miles away from everybody and everything — away and away to the top of the tallest hill where there wasn't even a bird, or a wind, to mar the solitude. It was a beautiful and terrible feeling. It was like staring at the stars on a cloudless night, like staring into the morning sky, pale and illimitable. It frightened him, but the fear was different from all other fears. Wonder was woven into it, and a cool, keen ecstasy.

The pictures, like various other things that had been in their lives for a long time, were too familiar, too intimately connected with fancies, to be judged by ordinary standards. The Kiplings never stopped to consider whether they were beautiful pictures, or good pictures. They were *their* pictures — just as the old brown teapot with the broken spout was theirs, and the red blanket that was used for Marie Antoinette's robe, and the Coronation Mugs, and the enamel soap dish with the sweet-smelling clots of soap on the lid, and the dented biscuit-tin full of buttons. They never definitely thought about these things, just as they seldom definitely thought about one another, but if they had done so it would have been with affection — that particular affection which a sense of ownership, and long association, breed. The Coronation Mugs (which for many years they had supposed to have been personally presented to the Duke by the King and Queen), the ragged blanket, the array of pictures — these were bits fitting into a familiar pattern; and each of them, by reason of its intensely personal significance, was quite different from all other mugs and blankets and pictures...

Robin, lying on her stomach before a grocery-box that was about to be promoted into a bookcase, was muttering something over to herself: 'Serve from the left, remove from the right; keep your eye on the water and relishes; crumb the tables before dessert —— Hey, Boots! what are you doing?'

Boots looked up guiltily: 'A sunset,' he confessed.

'Where?'

He swung open the door and disclosed, on the other side of it, a mass of hectic-colored clouds topped with a pear-shaped sun. 'I could paint trees,' he suggested, 'and birds ——'

But he was given a bureau-drawer instead.

Then Ricky picked up the latest and most fascinating topic: 'I wonder what they will be like — upstairs.'

'I wonder ——' They all looked thoughtful for a moment.

'Thirty people!' Mimsy said, and the words seemed to open up vistas of possibilities. For people were still very wonderful to the Kiplings. Strangers were shrouded in mists of glamour; persons of importance, parading against glittering horizons, commanded their swift applause, their unquestioning loyalty. After a while the thin blade of doubt would begin to slit through their confidence: they would query a little, they would gradually understand. But now, when Mimsy said 'Thirty people!' they felt an involuntary thrill. Who knew, who had the slightest idea, what those thirty people might turn out to be? Perhaps — perhaps ——

'They may be *anything!*' Robin declared with a flourish.

And Poppet, feeling pleasantly exhilarated, sat back on her heels and gushed into the 'Mikado' songs:

'Do you wonder who we are?
We are gentlemen of Japan ——'

Gay, swaggering tunes! The Kiplings' voices strutted through the basement, brandishing them like flags:

'Behold the Lord High Executioner,
A personage of noble rank and title ——'

Then Boots and Ricky alone:

'From every kind of man obedience I expect.
I'm the Emperor of Japan ——'

And Robin and Mimsy and Poppet flaring out:

'And I'm his daughter-in-law-elect!'

And then everybody in a wild burst:

'So bow — bow — to his daughter-in-law-elect!'

It was a fine world where care could be downed with a song, and ugliness defeated with a few cans of paint...

The next morning Robin went upstairs to work in Mrs. McMasters's dining-room. For a little while everything was blurred by a haze of excitement; but when this had cleared off, the people swarming about the various tables became sharp-cut and distinctive — like so many vignettes framed within the narrow limits of the meal-time:

There were Mr. and Mrs. Harry Andrews, who presented that quaint phenomenon of a husband and wife who had become so absorbed in one another that they had acquired a certain physical resemblance. Strangers frequently mistook them for brother and sister; and, for some obscure reason, they always seemed to feel that an insult must lurk in the mistake. Opposite them was Mr. Bertie Wudgewood, who appeared to be forever tottering on the brink of a violent argument; and Mrs. Bertie Wudgewood, who was always saying 'There, there!' in a thin little voice frayed by years of anxious cautioning. At another table was Miss Wernstein, with a great array of gold teeth which lent an air of richness and opulence to an otherwise meager countenance; and Thorold K. Gloom, a very bright gentleman, whose intelligence was at the service of his imagination; and the Miss Pongs, two small, dignified ladies who wore impressive hats mounded with flowers and bows and fruit, and believed, quite passionately, that Pitman's shorthand was superior to Gregg's; and Mr. B. B. Oswald, an excessively pink young man who soaked up other people's ideas like a sponge and squeezed them out again, at the opportune moment, as opinions of his own. There was Miss Savage, with a fine dashing eyebrow that ran the length of her forehead — a fascinating eyebrow rather like a misplaced mustache; and Agnesse Litherinton, who reviewed books and plays for a shy little magazine, the policy of which was to beam upon the world and insinuate that everything attempted was radiantly successful. In a corner was Mr. Lardon, once an actor and now a solid mass of reminiscences; and Miss Avalonne, who wore strange flaunting clothes and read French books — which was considered clever, but probably immoral; and Miss Pansy Allen Samp, with her pitiful eyes and her air of grasping, a trifle desperately, for something that she had always just missed: 'He said that he simply *must* call — *you* know how it is ——' And then a giggle, like the ringing of a tin bell somewhere inside of her. Mr. Hodgins, the Business Man, and Hester, his Dear Wife, were at another table; and Sidney Sorrister, a very young person who yearned to be a Socialist or an Anarchist or something really drastic, but didn't quite know how to go about it; and Mrs. Wilson, who had the smooth look of one who has never questioned life or herself; and Miss Swallow, a wan and weary lady who used such a powerful perfume that other people were liable to feel slightly dizzy when first brought in contact with it. There was a girl who slushed her food around, and made sarcastic remarks about Matrimony and God and Motherhood; and another girl who looked vaguely worried and said: 'Darling, your soup!' There was a woman with pimples on her face and stars in her eyes; and there was a large, greasy, liberal-minded individual who frequently remarked: 'Ah, well, there's bad in the best of us, good in the worst of us' — and wiped his nose on his napkin...

And over them all loomed the clumsy figure of Mrs. Alfecia McMasters — detached and enigmatic behind walls of flesh.

Robin had half the dining-room to attend to, and the other half was managed by Gertrude, a buxom damsel with full, loose lips that slid back and forth over her teeth in a rapid succession of easy smiles. Aprons frilling out crisply, loaded trays swung high on one hand. 'Good morning, Mrs. Wilson ——Good morning, Mr. Oswald——' Cars rushing past the windows; sunshine deluging the tables, clear and pale, so that the white-and-pink dishes took on a cool luster; sunshine dealing unkindly with Miss Samp's blotched complexion, and graciously with Miss Avalonne's gleaming hair. Mrs. Bird in the kitchen, spooning out cereal: a big helping for Mr. Wudgewood, very little helpings for the Miss Pongs. The pungent fragrance of bacon and bubbling coffee; Sahara toasting bread in a corner, huge stacks of it, and swearing amiably if it burned.

Back into the dining-room again with a steaming load. Mr. Andrews squirting grapefruit juice into Mrs. Andrews's eye; Miss Savage and Miss Wernstein inspecting one another's plates surreptitiously to see who had drawn the larger clot of egg: 'Salt, dear — oh, no, *you* first ——' The untidy girl jabbering through a mouthful of food: 'The maternal instinct, pah! Haven't an atom of it, and damned glad ——'

Back into the kitchen again. Mrs. Bird singing in a harsh, throaty voice, and nibbling a strip of bacon. 'Anybody got anything new on, Robin?'

'Mrs. Hodgins — a blouse, sort of mud-colored. I wish she'd get *bright* clothes!'

Sahara snorting over the toaster. '*He* buys them — he buys every stitch she wears ——'

More cereal for Sidney Sorrister; more coffee for the Andrews...

'Really, my dear, it's the silliest book! They all go into a decline and love the wrong people, and the hero has warts ——'

'*Darling!* — on your chin — *egg* ——'

'A little marmalade, Etta?'

'No, thank you, Emily.'

Then everybody out at last, everybody branching away from the house in a score of different directions. The messy business of clearing up, and resets for lunch. Stacks of pink-and-white plates, hot from the dishpan, flipped expertly across the tables; silver making sharp glints of light in the sunshine, glasses sparkling coldly. Flower-water to be changed — windows to be opened to get rid of the bacon smell. Sahara shedding crumbs all over the room in a mad dash for the ice-man; and Mrs. McMasters, a moving mountain of taffeta and jangling necklaces, swaying through to confer with Mrs. Bird in the kitchen: 'Well, what's the matter with it? Sour? Rubbish! Don't you think I know sour milk when I smell it! Now, then, no cheek. If your feelings are wounded, you can leave. I don't care, it doesn't make any difference to me!' And Mrs. Bird muttering violently under her breath, and sometimes putting on her hat (a terrific affair with half a dozen pins sprouting out of it and spirals of peculiar-looking feathers) and saying: 'I've stood enough!' in a majestic tone. And Mrs. McMasters trumpeting: 'Don't be a fool! If you go out the front door, you can stay out!' And Mrs. Bird thinking of her husband (who was decorative rather than lucrative) and of the Future, and of various other touching things; and the hat being hung up again...

In the dining-room Gertrude talked a great deal about a certain individual named Mart. He was, apparently, very handsome and amusing, and very thrilling: 'You know, Robin — *thrilling!*' Her voice thrust an insinuation into the word.

'Really?' Robin said brightly.

Gertrude, in due time, sensed abysmal depths of ignorance: 'Haven't you ever been in love?'

'Who — me?'

'Yes, you.'

'No — I guess not,' unless one counted romantic affairs with knights in pictures and kings in poems.

'Oh, my *dear!*' She was oozing with sympathy. 'How old are you?'

'Seventeen.'

'My goodness! when *I* was seventeen ——' her tone suggested a vaguely lurid past. 'Haven't you ever gone out with any one?'

Robin shook her head; then bristled quickly against a fresh attack of commiseration: 'I'm all right — I don't want to be in love!'

'But what do you *do* with yourself?'

'Do with myself ——' It seemed a rather absurd question.

But later on she began to toy a little, delicately, tentatively, with the thought of Mart. She wondered why he liked Gertrude; she stared at herself for a long time in the mirror, and wondered if he would like her...

The evening they had chosen was warm, and rich with stars.

Robin had put her best dress on, and Mimsy's gloves, and

Poppet's coral beads. 'Do I look nice?' she asked them anxiously.

The Kiplings inspected her from all angles — a small, eager figure with eyes like blue jewels. 'Your petticoat's showing, and there's something the matter with your hair.'

'I frizzed it,' she explained. 'Gertrude showed me how.'

'It looks awful,' Ricky muttered. He had been sulking ever since Robin had told him about the invitation. He didn't want her to go; at first he had quite passionately objected: 'How do you know you'll like them — how do you know who they are?'

She was surprised at his vehemence; and then indignant: 'They're friends of Gertrude's — and, anyhow, it's none of your business, Ricky!'

'It is, too!' he declared, feeling a sudden, and rather solemn, sense of responsibility. 'I don't want you going round with any old ——'

She waved aside his objections (which were more heated than specific), and looked thoughtful. 'I wonder,' she said, 'if perfume costs very much ——'

But Ricky refused to bestow his blessing upon the outing. He felt upset; in a subtle way he felt jealous — jealous of the eagerness with which Robin was looking forward to something that, for the first time, he hadn't been invited to share.

When the bells of the corner church jangled out the hour, the two youngest Kiplings mounted the pumpkin-colored chest of drawers and stared interestedly through the windows. 'They're coming!' Poppet announced after a moment or so; and Ricky seized a book and began to read it upside-down with great deliberation; and Robin dashed into the hall and then dashed back again for a handkerchief. 'Do I look all right?' she demanded breathlessly. 'Do I really look all right ——'

Outside, under the pale glow of Our Moon, Gertrude greeted her with an effusive tenderness that was rather bewildering: 'Oh, *here* you are, darling — I'm *so* glad you've come!' She managed the introductions in a voice dripping with sweetness: 'This is Mart — remember I told you about him? And that's Walter. Mind you give her a good time, Walter — she's such a nice little kid!'

They laughed, so Robin laughed, too — but inside she felt a cold shock of disappointment. For Mart, the absorbing and glamorous Mart, was nothing but a pimply youth with hair like a cap of grease...

All the way down the avenue and across the park she felt glum and rather mournful. Why had Gertrude told her he was wonderful? He wasn't — anybody could see he wasn't! And Walter wasn't either — not after the splendid figures her fancy had conjured up. And what was the matter with Gertrude, anyhow? Her voice, her whole manner, seemed to have undergone a peculiar change. In the harsh light of the street-car it became even more apparent. She laughed a great deal, and she was frank and a little gross in her devotion to Mart; she leaned towards him with something groveling in her attitude, something fawning in her eyes. It made Robin feel uncomfortable, it made her feel ashamed for Gertrude.

After a while Walter slid his hand over hers, not impetuously, but as if it were merely a routine movement that the occasion called for. 'Why don't you take your gloves off?' he asked. So she took them off and put them in her pocket— carefully, because they were the nicest gloves the Kiplings possessed. Then his arm dropped across her shoulder, and she sat quite rigid, with a sudden flutter of excitement in her throat. 'He must like me!' she told herself. 'He's holding my hand, he's got his arm around me!' Her disappointment was not so much dispelled as blurred with a subtle sense of gratification...

'Hello!' Gertrude said from the front seat. 'How are you getting on?'

Mart twisted round a little: 'Oh, they're all right!' he observed.

Everybody laughed; but something in his tone disquieted Robin. It seemed to her, as the minutes pounded past, that they were engaged in a sort of game — a game in which only she was uncertain of her part.

There was a lake at the end of the car-line, all dim and still. Thousands of white stars were burning above it, and thousands of trees rose phantom-like against the stars. They followed a narrow path that hugged the edge of the woods, curving and recurving until the flickering lights of the station were lost and there was nothing before them or behind them but sprawling shadows and the lovely hush of the evening. In spite of the intensity of her reactions to the setting and the situation, Robin felt as if she were moving through a dream. There was a witchery in the spring night that made all things a little unreal...

Mart and Gertrude had gone ahead; their voices came waveringly through the trees, and the pale shimmer of Gertrude's dress was like a shred of moonlight. Then they seemed to be sucked down into the silent depths of the woods...

The stars glinted between the branches; the air was pure and cool. It washed away Robin's excitement, it left her very quiet, and rather puzzled. 'Where are the others?' she wanted to know.

Walter laughed, and motioned vaguely towards the thicket.

'Shouldn't we follow them?' she asked.

He laughed again. '*They* don't want us ——' he said.

She paused for a moment, and stared at the lake — lustrous between the trees, glimmering most delicately in the starlight. And as she stood there she felt suddenly awkward — self-conscious, and acutely, uncomfortably conscious of the person beside her. It was too dark to see his face now, but she could remember that it was sallow, with a sloping chin and sleepy eyes. So different, so dreadfully different from the brave and beautiful people in pictures and poems. She didn't want to be here with him! Why was she? What were they supposed to do — what was going to happen? She fumbled in her pocket for Mimsy's gloves; she tried to talk, but the tremendous stillness of the woods was too much for her; it was a shield against which all sounds, however determined, seemed to break and fall...

Then she felt Walter's hand on her shoulder. It was hot, it crushed against the crispness of her best dress. 'Let's sit here,' he said. 'Come on ——'

She stood quite rigid in the pathway, her heart pounding like a drum. And suddenly all the beauty fell away from the night. These trees, this deep, dead hush, even the water with its silver scales, were stripped of their loveliness and imbued with something ominous, something repellent.

'I want to go home,' Robin said in a small voice.

'Aw, come on ——' His fingers were hurting her arm, and she wrenched herself away from them. 'What's the matter?' he asked. Through the darkness she could feel that he was surprised.

What was the matter? She didn't quite know — except that she was frightened, except that something she had always found beautiful, the spacious night, the gracious night, was now smirched with ugliness.

He reached out his hand again, but she shrank from it and began to move up the path, slowly at first, then swifter and swifter. Where were the others — where was Gertrude? But she remembered that it was no use looking for Gertrude. She couldn't help, she couldn't dismiss this sudden sense of panic; for she was queer to-night, with strange things written in her eyes...

Walter shouted to her through the silence, but she only ran away faster, stumbling, pitching forward now and then — a small, breathless figure with white gloves and carefully frizzed hair. The station sparkled out against the shadowy trees. It was deserted, and she rushed past it and up the tracks, on and on, until the lake and the flicker of lights were far behind her and there was nothing but dim, flat fields on every side. Then she slowed down a little, holding her hands against her pounding heart; and after a while she began to cry, not tempestuously, but softly, mournfully — because her best dress was torn and Mimsy's gloves were dirtied, and because life was so disappointing, so infinitely less beautiful than dreams.

For hours she seemed to trudge between two glinting tracks, mile after mile, until houses loomed up where the fields had been, and street-lamps spilled yellow pools of light on the pavements. People spoke to her now and then, but she stumbled past them, too tired for fear — only conscious of something unlovely in the atmosphere that she had never been aware of before. Cats were yowling in the alleyways; a man and woman lurched across her path, clinging to one another, laughing in loose, stupid voices. '*Oh!*' Robin said miserably, and began to cry again. The tears slid down her cheeks, bitter tears, wistful ones, shed for the lost beauty of the night...

On and on, past rows of shuttered shops, through the park, under the shadow of the corner church with its spire like a finger among the stars. And at last Our Moon — a pale glimmer at the end of the street. She moved towards it, draggingly; and as she moved she noticed something at the top of the three steps. It was Ricky, huddled there with a coat over his pajamas — Ricky fast asleep.

Robin sank down beside him. She felt tragic and unutterably weary; but over her weariness there flickered for a moment a delicate light.

For Ricky had come out to look for her, Ricky had waited and waited...

2

When school closed and the summer holidays swung open before them, Mimsy pocketed her feelings and consented to work in Mrs. McMasters's kitchen.

There were saucepans to scour, and stacks of greasy dishes to scrape, and the incessant jangle of Mrs. Bird's voice: 'Five bullets, they said, and right in the poor lady's stomach! A *shame*, I call it! And her little innocent — no, I guess she didn't have a child. It was that Perkins woman. The one who jumped out of the window, last month, remember? — with a note in her mouth telling all about it. Well, some thinks it's her husband, the brute! And some — put the lid on, dearie, or you'll get a walloping from Mrs. Mac! — some thinks this other johnny did it — a miserable-looking cur, I *must* say, with a nose like a pincushion! For myself, and mind you I know the woman who saw the cab drive up in the middle of the night, and she told me...'

Mimsy would turn away, shuddering, trying not to listen. For she had always made a point of skirting unpleasantness — rather more consciously, perhaps, than the other Kiplings because, being less fortified with humor and possessing an imagination that, instead of flaring up defensively, was apt to flicker out before a harsh gust of facts, she had come to combine a sensitive awareness of disagreeable things with a fastidious determination to ignore them. But this steady flow of the horrors of the day, frothed with reminiscences of past crimes and sparkling prophecies of future ones, was more than she could comfortably cope with. The words persisted in seeping into her thought, drip, drip, forming loathsome little pools that swelled into a dark tide at night and overwhelmed her.

'And this other girl — now *there's* a baggage for you! She bawls out "My God!" and the judge tells her to shut up! There was a regular row, believe me; and the mother-in-law fainted, poor old soul...'

How Mrs. Bird could rattle them off! She knew every move of a case, every suspect, every name involved, the places and the dates, the position of the corpse when found, what it was (or was not) wearing, and the precise manner in which the criminal went about his dirty work. She came to conclusions rapidly and picked the guilty person long before the jury did; and if their selection didn't coincide with her own, she accused them bitterly of being bribed. As a rule the men were 'brutes' and the women were 'poor ladies'; but now and then (for reasons that were apt to be somewhat cloudy to every one but herself) her sympathies would undergo an abrupt reversal and the participants in the drama would become 'gentlemen' and 'hussies.' She firmly believed in justice, but had little respect for policemen; and in capital punishment, because there was something so much more picturesquely tragic about it than there was about a life-sentence. She attended court trials as other people attended church; and, if anybody happened to be electrocuted, stood outside prison walls, panting with emotion. She admired those who bore up bravely on the eve of death, and felt that 'Forgive them, Lord, for they know not what they do' made a very tasteful ending to a dramatic career. Ricky had come to the conclusion that she would have had a fine time in some age when slaughter, on a large and fancy scale, was considered fashionable entertainment. He could picture her at an arena gathering (blue apron and feathered hat in the midst of a Cæsar-like multitude), sprightly, attentive, woggling her thumb up or down as the spirit moved...

Mimsy wondered sometimes why she didn't go mad with a head so stuffed with morbid and sordid deeds; but Mrs. Bird, with admirable versatility, could toss aside a murder and the next moment pick up a rollicking chorus:

'. . . . . thanks, no!
I had a banana with Lady Diana,
I'm Burlington Bertie from Bow!'

Mr. Bird, she once explained, had spent the greater part of his youth in London music-halls, so he had a choice repertoire of songs to teach her in the sanctity of their home — songs which were expurgated for public use by the simple substitution of loud da-dee-da's (accompanied by an expression of secret relish) for such passages as it was felt more tactful to withhold...

For six days Mimsy bore up, but on the seventh her courage collapsed and Robin found her weeping in the basement. 'I can't go back to it, I can't! I'll do anything else in the world, Robin — but I *can't* scrape garbage!' She was shaken with a fierce sense of revulsion: 'Those murders — those terrible murders — and the *smells!* Oh, I'd rather die!' She looked very fragile and forlorn — but somewhat elegant, even in grief.

'All right,' Robin said briskly, and went off, without further ado, to explain the situation to Mrs. McMasters. For although there were a number of things that she was uncertain of just now, ranging from the personal to the impersonal, from the solid perplexities of earning a living to those large, vague, poetic problems that float, in nebulous procession, across the adolescent mind, it seemed quite obvious that there wasn't any point in making one's self miserable...

Upstairs, in the front hall, Mrs. Andrews was seated on the edge of the umbrella-stand with her stout little legs shooting out towards Mr. Andrews, who was jerking her rubbers on for her because the evening paper had hinted at cloudiness. And in the reception-room Miss Pansy Allen Samp, dressed expectantly for the company that never arrived, was playing 'Pale Hands I Loved' with a sort of nervous dash; and the Miss Pongs, looking very flushed and heroic, were telling Mr. Oswald how their nephew (whom neither of them had seen since the age of three months) had just done something most distinguished, most gripping:

'And the general said ——'

'The captain, Etta.'

'Yes, dear. The captain said, "Corporal Williams" — that's Dickie — "will you undertake ——"'

'No, dear! He *volunteered!*'

'Oh — of course. He volunteered! And all by himself — was he all by himself, Emily?'

'Yes, dear.'

'All by himself, Mr. Oswald! And such a *desperate* undertaking! Everything depended upon it. I shudder to think of what would have happened had he failed. But he got through! He blew it up — and he killed every one of them! Fancy that!'

'*Four* of them, Mr. Oswald!'

'And all by himself — you said he was all by himself, Emily?'

'Yes, dear.'

'All by himself, Mr. Oswald!'

Astounding and gratifying thought! Dickie, the little baby with the fuzz of golden hair, had grown up and killed four men all by himself...

Robin hurried down the hall and rapped smartly on the last door. She was always very careful about rapping now, ever since a certain spring twilight when she had walked into the room, unannounced, and found Mrs. McMasters crying. That was a secret experience. She had tumbled out again quickly, burning with embarrassment — the dreadful embarrassment that children are apt to feel when they discover a grown-up unmasked by his emotions, giving vent to grief or, worse still, to amorousness. Mrs. McMasters crying! There was something jarring, something almost outrageous in the idea. Other people cried, of course; young people — like Poppet and Gertrude. But Mrs. McMasters was different; she was cryptic and ironic, and she was quite old. Robin had always assumed that, somehow or other, she had got beyond crying.

Then Miss Savage had appeared at the end of the hall, bristling with complaints as usual: 'Where is she — in her room?' 'No,' Robin had said. And for a long time she had stood outside the closed door, guarding it...

After that she had become conscious of certain hints — vague, fragmentary; because nobody seemed to have anything very definite to bolster them up with. There had been a Mr. McMasters; he had gone off somewhere, and not alone — little sparks to set an inflammable imagination into a flare of elaborate conjectures. Robin was very impressed, not so much by the allusions to Mr. McMasters's rakish exit as by the fact that Mrs. McMasters, whom she had supposed to be invulnerable, could be hurt by such an occurrence. There was something disturbing in the discovery; but she never spoke of it, not even to the other Kiplings; and never, by the faintest flicker of pity, did she betray to Mrs. McMasters the secret — that she had found her once stripped of her dignity, had heard her once crying among the shadows. Some chivalrous instinct, combined with that sense of embarrassment, compelled her to act as if nothing whatever had happened...

This evening, instead of being dark, the room was full of amber light, thrown down slantwise from a western sky that was one pure sheet of gold above the roofs. And the lady of the house, looking theatrically grotesque in a flowered dressing-gown, was planning menus.

'Hello,' she raised a fat hand in casual greeting. 'Open the window a bit will you — thanks. Well, what do you want?'

Robin explained; and 'Rubbish!' Mrs. McMasters boomed. 'She'll have to get over it.'

'But I don't think she will.'

'Why not? You don't mope round letting smells upset you.'

'Mimsy's different ——'

'She's shirking.'

Robin rushed swiftly to the line of defense: 'If we asked her to keep on with the work, she would.'

'Well, why don't you?'

'Because there's no point in it — if it's going to make her miserable.'

'How pathetic! Have a peppermint.'

She refused one, just to show that she was displeased. 'I don't think you understand Mimsy.'

'And do you?'

'I know that ugly things sort of — *grind* on her.'

'Oh, all right.' Mrs. McMasters shrugged nonchalantly. 'I'm sure I don't care.' She blew her nose with an inelegant bang; and then: 'What about the rest of you?' she inquired.

They were ticked off with brisk precision: 'Boots is selling papers; Ricky is looking for a job; Mimsy can take care of the basement now; and Poppet — could you use Poppet for anything?'

'Garbage, and so on. Only I dare say the smells'll make her nervous.'

Robin shook her head: 'She won't mind; she's different ——' She paused for a moment; and then, thoughtfully, and rather to her own surprise, voiced an idea that, in spite of its apparent simplicity, she had always veered away from with distrust, because it seemed to insinuate the possibility of disruption — to imperil, somehow, the close and beautiful unity of the Kiplings:

'In a way,' she said, 'I suppose we're all different.'

The slants of amber light were thinning; above the roofs, peaked like dark tents on the edge of the sky, the bright sunset gold was burning itself into the ashes of dusk ...

Mrs. McMasters stood up, her flowered dressing-gown bulging enormously. 'Well,' she remarked, 'you're going to be a handful, that's certain.'

'Who? Me?'

'And your family.'

'Why — what's the matter with us?'

She permitted herself to indulge in a fancy figure: 'You're all like engines, fast ones — without any tracks.'

'Oh!' Robin said. She thought that quite effective.

And so in the early summer Mimsy became mistress of the basement.

During the mornings she wore an apron and worked; but in the afternoons she donned her best dress, jonquil-colored, somewhat richer than the pale gold of her hair, and sallied forth into the city — a lady of leisure. She rode on the swan-boats in the park; she visited shops, only the most fashionable and exclusive ones; and, for long stretches of time, she sat in hotel lobbies, surrounded by palms and mirrors, looking delicately aloof and delicately expectant — as if she were waiting for somebody of the utmost importance. On these occasions she was no longer Mimsy Kipling, age fourteen; she was Mrs. Reginald Vance-Rutledge — with a dim but edifying background composed of Mr. Reginald Vance-Rutledge, several gifted children, and a distinguished abode (somewhat on the order of Windsor Castle) into which nothing unlovely or annoying was ever permitted to find its way. It was a secret game, old and very fascinating...

But one afternoon, while she was sitting in the plump lap of a velvet chair, with the usual pageant of people passing before her, this veil of pretense was pierced by a sudden thrust from the matter-of-fact world, a sudden discovery. Mimsy found that she was beautiful — or rather, she sensed for the first time something of the potency of that beauty. The realization sprang from one of those subtle contacts that flash out every now and then, like will-o'-the-wisps, over more substantial experiences — too brief and too elusive to hold their shape in memory, and yet, at the moment of occurring, pregnant with significance.

Across the aisle, in front of a mirrored sweep of mulberry-colored draperies, a man leaned forward on his cane and stared at her. Then, without moving his eyes, he made a remark to the woman beside him — a tall, modish, not particularly young woman, with ear-rings like exquisitely carved ice. She turned; and for one instant, for the smallest fragment of time, the suave expression dropped from her face as if it had been a mask.

That was all. But Mimsy, sitting alert and embarrassed in the velvet chair, understood, intuitively, that the man was admiring her, with something gross in his admiration that she had never encountered, or had never been fully conscious of, before; and that because of this the woman was angry, and, underneath her anger, afraid...

Outside again, in the flare of summer sunshine, she crossed the avenue and made her way into the cool greenness of the park. She followed the popular path, the one that cut through the lilac bushes and belted the pond; she walked down the center of it slowly — intensely aware of every glance that veered towards her, feeling alternately gratified and troubled. She was no longer Mrs. Reginald Vance-Rutledge; she was Mimsy Kipling — beautiful Mimsy Kipling, who, without raising a finger, could disturb people, as the woman in the hotel had been disturbed, or interest people, as all along the way they were being interested.

For the first time the reality was more absorbing than the dream.

3

It was Poppet who found the advertisement:

> Wanted — by Meredith, Poynter & Company, Publishers, an office boy, alert, intelligent.

And Robin, Mimsy, and Boots rose to the occasion as one man: 'Ricky!' they chorused.

Ten minutes later, having dumped most of the money out of the brown teapot, they clattered forth to buy Ricky a new suit, with Long Trousers, that he might make as impressive an appearance as possible in the business world. In the store, which (by dint of flamboyant advertising) was unfortunate enough to attract them, they were voluble and exacting. They sat in a row, monopolizing all the chairs the establishment possessed, while suit after suit was presented, examined, and dismissed. They could be neither hurried nor squelched. 'Will it wear well?' they demanded; and, 'Will it shrink?'

Eventually the salesman, a wistful-looking soul with a girlish voice, succeeded in shoving Ricky into an alcove to have something tried on; and the rest of the Kiplings, left to their own resources, gazed with bright attentiveness at a stout gentleman, inadequately screened, who was having his stomach measured...

Then Ricky emerged. He came forward, swaggering a bit, glancing at himself in the mirror with oblique curiosity. 'I guess this'll do,' he remarked, very casual.

The others stared at him, impressed, and somewhat surprised.

'Gosh!' Poppet said. 'You look like a grown-up!' For the first time she felt a sort of detached, un-family, interest in him …

After the suit business had been settled, they hurried down the avenue and across the park, walking in a solid row with linked arms so that everybody else was swept off the path. But when they arrived at the publishing-house entrance, Ricky faltered.

'Go on!' the others prodded. 'Go on, Ricky!'

He became suddenly irritable: 'I wish you wouldn't all hang round me like this ——'

They were offended, and a trifle hurt.

'What's the matter?' Robin inquired.

He stared sulkily into a shop-window. What was the matter? He couldn't explain it to any one, he couldn't even explain it to himself — this shrinking from new contacts, this capricious reluctance to seize an opportunity that he had been searching for, day after day. All the things that he would have to do flashed out before him, vividly, like a series of little pictures: he would have to walk up those steps, and open the door, and inside he would have to ask somebody where to go and whom to see, and people would look at him and question him — brusquely, perhaps, so that all his words would be driven away and he would find himself sinking deeper and deeper into a pit of glumness. It seemed such a long, perilous, complicated procedure. Considering it, he felt himself assailed by a sense of inertia. He wanted to close his eyes and open them again to find that it was three instead of two o'clock, and that the whole ordeal was behind instead of in front of him…

Robin was looking puzzled. 'D'you want me to go in with you, Ricky?'

He half-clutched at the offer; but his pride flared up in time: 'No — of course not!' he said coldly. Then he turned and dashed up the steps as if he were, and had been right along, in the most terrific hurry.

The others stood together in a little group, their hands in their pockets.

'Look here,' Robin directed, 'if he doesn't get it, for goodness' sake don't ask him a lot of questions. Pretend it doesn't matter.'

'We could have ice-cream,' suggested Poppet, who, at this stage of her career, believed that there were few earthly sorrows which the corner confectioner couldn't heal.

They waited; and after ten minutes or so Ricky emerged. He looked white and somewhat shaky — so that everybody rushed headlong to what seemed to be the most obvious conclusion.

'Well, never mind,' Mimsy consoled. 'There'll probably be a lot more ——'

'But I got it!' he said. And breathed very hard.

The others went farther down the avenue to buy theater tickets, because so momentous an achievement had to be celebrated, of course; but Ricky walked off alone in the opposite direction, past the park, past the cathedral, chiseled darkly against the sapphire sky, and then, at last, towards a long white building, calm as some ancient temple on a sunlit hill, with a fluted colonnade that striped the pale wall with slanting shadows, mauve-colored — like the shadows of trees on snow.

This was a place that he often came away to by himself...

After the scorching sunshine in the streets, the wide, white hall seemed to hold the exquisite coolness of a grotto. The stairway, fanshaped and topped with blue-and-gold murals, was deserted; the rooms, opening out on either side of him, and lit with an elusive sort of light that appeared to be filtering through a sieve of darkness, were hushed, and empty except for the occasional uniformed figure of an attendant. In the winter-time there were swarms of people here — art students in dirty smocks, bearded gentlemen rooted raptly in front of a picture or a vase, methodical souls with notebooks, little clusters of babbling ladies, very bright and attentive, like children at a zoo. But now, during the summer months, you could go on and on, through galleries and corridors and courts, feeling as if you were lost in an abandoned treasure-house.

Tapestries on pale walls; three-paneled screens, patterned with monkeys, parrots, and huge-petaled flowers; cases of carved ivory and carved jade; of web-thin laces, miniatures, wide-curving combs, and little silver pigs and silver coaches. Statuary, with a delicate bluish overtone on the marble curves; French chairs upholstered in pastel-colored brocades; bronzes; dull-gleaming pewter; great jars, amethyst and yellow, rose and green; prayers on parchment, mirrors, candlesticks, metal goblets, and fantastic jewelry; shelves of china, shelves of Venetian glass; mandarins' robes, flaring out stiffly; swinging lamps; porcelains, snuffboxes, and wrought-iron brackets; totem poles and tooled leather; choir stalls from a monastery in the Veneto; a painted fan that had swung from the white wrist of a queen. Little cell-like rooms full of prints; and, above them, large rooms and long halls full of paintings — hundreds upon hundreds of paintings, one after the other: rain on a city square at twilight; Spanish dancers; little girls in starched pinafores; sunlit quarries; Jesus with a crown of thorns; mountains, and meadows, and water-lily ponds...

And, at the end of the most spacious hall, the special picture — the one that had come to be more important, more significant, to Ricky than all the rest of the treasures mounded together. The girl dancing beside the sea.

She was white and beautiful — as white as apple-blossoms, as white as the little moon. She was dancing with her hair floating on the wind — she was sweet and gay, with her slim arms flung against the morning sky. Ricky had found her there a long time ago; he thought her lovelier than all the lovely things on earth. At first she had been no more than an enchanting picture; but now she was something of which the picture was merely a fragment — a muted phase. She was a person, a dream-person — never, even when she was most real to him, did he forget that she was only a dream-person spun from the fine, flaming stuff of his imagination. And with her, in that romantic, that delicately intimate relationship which his fancy had established, he, too, was a sort of dream-person — a Ricky who was never nervous and never confused, who always said clever things and did charming things at the proper moment, instead of thinking of them when it was too late...

He called the girl Yseult, because the name sounded faëry-like to him, ethereal and poignant. And he wove about her and about himself innumerable little idylls from which the rest of the Kiplings were quite ruthlessly excluded. Sometimes the idylls were gay, full of dancing and laughing and April sunshine; but more often they were tragic — the glamorous tragedies of youth which seem so much more satisfying, so much more artistic, than the dwindling down of romance into honorable matrimony. Beautiful tragedies, in moonlit gardens, in shadowy woods. Parting forever in poetic anguish, dying in one another's arms...

Sometimes he wondered if he would ever find Yseult, or anybody like her, in the outside world; and once the thought occurred to him, very briefly, that however many people might enter into his life later on, there would never be any one of such flawless loveliness, so exquisitely understanding, so sweet and whimsical and loyal — that there would never be any one real whom he would love as he loved the girl dancing beside the sea...

After a while a bell clanged through the hushed halls.

'Closing time!' a voice trumpeted, an extraordinary, disembodied voice that seemed to burst forth from nowhere in particular. And people began to pop up surprisingly in different directions; a fashionable young matron, three little girls with bead purses, an old gentleman, a stout woman with a bundle of groceries and half-moons of perspiration under her arms. They made their way together down the corridor towards the fanshaped staircase, silently, somewhat self-consciously — as if they had been caught stealing jam. Lights were going off in the rooms about them; the arched doorways opened now into mysterious caverns of purplish shadows; gilt frames glimmered a little; statues loomed up like ghosts — bewildering crowds of ghosts — with white arms flung wildly in the air. Downstairs there were a few more people; and long vistas of marble halls, mauve-colored, hung with dimly patterned tapestries, blotted with the dark shapes of old cabinets and carved chests. Then outside again, out of the coolness and quietness.

Ricky stood for a moment behind the fluted columns; then he plunged down once more into the hot and troubled life of the streets...

That evening they all went to the theater, sitting, as usual, far up with the motley crew of the second balcony. They memorized the cast and the scenes; located the nearest exit; asked the woman in front to remove her hat, please; and then leaned forward, tense and expectant, while the bulging lights above them turned from a harsh glare to a glimmer, and from a glimmer to nothing at all.

The play proved to be a rather intricate affair, threaded with insinuations and subtleties. A beautiful lady got married, after a preliminary skirmish of words, and went off to the husband's home, where none of the neighbors would have anything whatever to do with her. Robin understood, Ricky understood, Mimsy was fairly certain that she understood; but Boots and Poppet were quite lost in a haze of ignorance.

'Why?' they wanted to know — their whispers, urgent and agitated, sliding back and forth through the darkness.

'Because she isn't — nice.'

'Why isn't she?' They were very persistent.

Robin shifted uneasily. 'Never mind — I'll tell you some other time.'

But they weren't used to having explanations postponed. 'What has she done, Robin?'

'Something — bad.'

'Murder?' Boots suggested helpfully.

'No, not murder.'

'Better or worse?' inquired Poppet — all bright attentiveness.

'Oh, *please* —' But even as she turned aside, Robin realized that evasions such as this were both stupid and futile, for once the Kiplings started on the track of an answer, they were utterly relentless, superbly undaunted...

Later on a new man made his appearance in the play; and the wife, having had an obscure sort of quarrel with the husband's daughter, rushed into another room and shot herself with an eloquent bang.

'Oh!' Boots and Poppet said blankly. '*Why* did she do that — what *made* her do it ——' They were extremely upset; but the curtain came down just then, and they were hurried out of the theater and round a corner to the stage-door, from whence, in due time, the beautiful lady emerged — intact, and very grand and glamorous.

The Kiplings stood in a row and gazed at her, wide-eyed, dazzled, as if she were a magical being from a world as far above their own as the moon was above the street-lamps.

'Hurray!' shouted Poppet, enormously impressed.

And the beautiful lady glanced over a satin shoulder and gave her a small, precious smile...

They wandered homeward through the park. Far above them the multitudinous signs of the city, orange-colored, pure silver, a strange cold amethyst farther away, were flashing against the insignificant stars. They were sparkling out between the boughs of the maples, between the little black leaves; they were turning the night into a wild extravaganza. The pond was puddled with pale gold; and across it, beyond the dark curve of the bridge, there was a glimmer of something white — the swan-boats moored at the landing, phantom boats now, with arched necks sleek as silk in the lamplight...

'Let's go and sit in them,' somebody suggested.

So they circled the water and climbed in — Boots and Poppet in one boat, to pretend they were Vikings; and Mimsy and Robin and Ricky in another, to sit silent for a while, staring through the trees at the garishly jeweled city. Then:

'Listen here,' Robin said, leaning forward with her chin in her hands, 'we've got to explain things to them.'

Ricky adopted an elaborately casual air: 'Do they know — anything?'

'About babies.'

'Who told them?'

'I did.'

Mimsy said: 'Aren't the lights pretty' — because she felt uncomfortable.

They lapsed into silence again for a few moments; and then,

'Who's going to explain about the play?'

Ricky stirred his fingers in the water, round and round so that they made a circle of glossy ripples. 'You tell Poppet,' he suggested, 'and I'll tell Boots.'

'Oh, but they're so little,' Mimsy inserted, rather breathlessly.

Robin looked worried. 'But what else is there to do? If they ask questions you've got to say *something*, haven't you? — and you can't very well tell lies.'

'And anyhow,' Ricky remarked, still carefully casual, 'they'll have to find out, sooner or later ——'

They turned for a moment towards the other boat. Boots and Poppet were standing in the prow, leaning forward dramatically with their hands held, Indian-fashion, above their eyes. They were Vikings with long, flashing helmets; they were Vikings sailing across a vast, tempestuous sea. 'Oho!' Poppet cried. 'What is that — away over there?' 'Land!' Boots assured her earnestly. 'A little speck of land that is probably Egypt ...'

'Yes,' Robin said. 'I suppose they will. But it seems rather a — pity.'

4

Mimsy had lit one of the tall white candles that they kept for special occasions...

'It must be time now,' Robin said. 'Boots, you show it to them.'

So Boots placed the two visitors underneath the window. 'Watch!' he commanded impressively. 'It'll be here in a moment!'

'What will?'

'Our Moon,' Poppet explained. 'Every evening it comes, just like this ——'

They tilted their heads and stared up through the narrow slit of glass. All was shadowy and blurred at first; then a pale light gleamed outside, a primrose-colored light, lovely in the rain.

'Our Moon!' Boots announced, with an introductory flourish.

Harriet was puzzled: 'You mean the lamp?'

'Oh!' Poppet shouted angrily. 'You crazy old fool ——' Then she stopped short, and everybody looked uncomfortable.

'Let's play something,' Mimsy suggested. 'Let's play Marie Antoinette.'

'Yes, *let's!*' Henry agreed, breathing loudly and anxiously in his great desire to be tactful. And while Robin hurried off to find the red blanket, he sat down with Poppet under the picture of the armored knights in the gold-and-russet forest.

Henry was a clumsy little boy. He had a nice smile and enormous feet, and was almost embarrassingly faithful to his friends. Being surrounded by vast masses of relatives and the carefully cultivated traditions of a family that traced its importance (by a route too devious for an outsider to follow) to a certain military gentleman whom the more voluble history books occasionally mentioned in a footnote, he found the lackadaisical career of the Kiplings extraordinarily and irresistibly attractive...

'I like your hair,' he told Poppet, ponderously gallant.

'Do you?' she said — and began to feel amiable again.

'Yes,' he confirmed weightily. Then, with a terrific effort: 'I like it better than anybody else's ——' But his voice broke in the middle and went soaring upward in a most spectacular and humiliating fashion.

'Oh, *Henry!*' Poppet said.

And Henry turned a rich crimson, and reflected, bitterly, that such things ought not to be permitted to occur...

Then Robin came back into the room.

'What's she wearing a blanket for?' Harriet wanted to know.

'It isn't a blanket — it's a Queen's robe. Come on, Ricky ——'

'I'm going to watch,' Ricky said.

'Ah, *please* ——' they implored.

So he came over and joined them, while Poppet finished up the instructions with business-like gusto: 'You stand here with us, see? And you wait there, Harriet, and when we yell "To the Guillotine!" you pull the Dauphin — that's Boots — out of her arms. And then we all go in that room, and you pretend ——'

The scene was ready; there was a moment's prelude of silence; then the Kiplings slipped into their various rôles and began to play with a zest, a passionate earnestness, that rather bewildered the visitors:

'Know you, haughty Sovereign, that all Paris is thirsting for your blood! Now, at last, are the people avenged ——'

'You think to break the spirit of the Queen of France, but that, dogs, you shall never do! She stands defiant before you — king, courtiers, glory, all gone — but her pride unbroken ——'

A small candle burning in the dusk; a small, white flame standing guard over the trial of Marie Antoinette.

A rustle of papers on the court table: 'We accuse you, Madame Capet ——'

'Mercy for my son, I beseech you!' A queen pleading, her face wet with tears: 'Do with me as you will, but spare the Dauphin, my son ——' A queen on her knees with her red robe pooled about her, with her white arms lifted in agonized supplication: 'Mercy — mercy — for my son!'

Danton, Marat, a tremendous throng, standing triumphant with raised arms. 'Away with her!' Louder, louder, like the blare of a trumpet: 'Away with her — away — *to the Guillotine!*'

A sudden slab of silence. Then a queer sound — a snicker!

The Kiplings were shocked into immobility.

'You look so funny crying — honest you do!'

Still not a word.

'Aren't you going to finish it?'

Robin got up from the floor, and the blanket fell from her shoulders — the make-believe robe of a make-believe queen. And one by one the others moved from behind the table.

'The candle is almost burned out,' Ricky said — so Poppet turned on the electric light; and Mimsy gathered together the papers; and Boots bent down and laced his shoe. They were all trying to pretend that nothing important had happened, that nothing had been lost; but deep within themselves they knew instinctively — tragically — that it was the last time they would ever play Marie Antoinette.

Later on, when it had stopped raining, they went outside, and the visitors started off in the direction of the park. But Henry, before he had reached the second street-lamp, turned with an abrupt movement and came back again.

'Look here,' he shot at them hurriedly, 'you won't mind about — about the game, will you?'

They were embarrassed — and annoyed at being made embarrassed.

'Of course not,' Ricky said, with the air of one dismissing a rather tasteless question.

Henry looked relieved. 'I wanted,' he announced, 'to knock her fool head in!' — which was quite an astonishing thing for him to say. Then he bolted off once more, with the peak of his large cap sketching a half-moon shadow across his face...

The Kiplings lingered for a while on the basement steps. Silver and gold and black the city lay about them, cooled and washed by the summer storm. It was beautiful, but with a sort of harsh beauty that left them untouched. There was none of the swift grace of green hills, none of the intimate loveliness of meadows and woodlands — no little friendly sounds, crickets, and water whispering over smooth stones, and the wind moving delicately in a hundred trees; and no friendly smells of warm grass and warm earth underneath the grass. Instead there were buildings, black and blunt against the evening stars; mass upon mass of buildings wherever they looked — except in the open space of the park, towards which the street seemed to flow like a dark, shallow river, and overhead where a silver advertisement flashed on and off, on and off, restless and radiant against the tranquillity of the sky...

Poppet swung herself on the wet railing. She felt suddenly glad that they were alone once more — just the Kiplings; she felt suddenly safe, as if a wall had closed round them again, kindly, protectingly. 'Don't let's ever ask anybody else to see us,' she said.

Then the front door opened above them, and Mrs. McMasters came plopping down the steps with a great creaking of corsets and jangling of necklaces. 'Hello!' she boomed affably. 'I'm out to pay you a visit.'

So they hurried back into the basement, their reveries scattered like thin clouds in a sudden gust of wind...

Mrs. McMasters eased herself, very carefully, into the most substantial-looking chair. 'Well,' she began, folding her fat hands beneath the swell of her bosom, 'what are you going to do with yourselves this winter? I won't have you starving on m' doorstep.'

'We don't intend to!' Ricky said haughtily.

'All right, all right!' she soothed with casual good-humor. 'Nobody's going to bite you. What's the program, Robin?'

Robin squatted down, cross-legged, under the Swag. 'Mimsy,' she ticked off, 'school and housekeeping. Ricky — school and part-time work at the publishing-house. Boots — school and papers. He's got an awfully good corner by the park ——'

'With squirrels,' Boots inserted. 'They come out through the railing and sit right on top of me!'

'Oh, they do not!' Poppet contradicted.

'They do, too!' he flared up, a trifle pompous in defense.

'Well, I've never seen them do it!'

'You don't see everything!' Boots informed her with dignity.

'Neither do you!' she snapped.

'Poppet — shut up!' Ricky ordered.

'It's not me, it's Boots!'

'Oh, you big ——'

'*Boots!*'

He subsided into a hurt silence — a stout little boy with red cheeks and tousled hair.

'End of the first round!' Mrs. McMasters observed. 'Go on, Robin.'

'Where was I? Oh, yes — Poppet. School and ——'

'I don't want to go to school,' Poppet decided.

'Don't be crazy!' Boots advised.

'Crazy yourself ——'

'*Poppet!*' Robin thundered; then, 'Why don't you want to go to school?'

'I'm tired of it.'

'Dear me!' said Mrs. McMasters, 'what a shame!'

'But, Poppet, you've got to.'

'Why?' she inquired politely.

'Well — to learn things, of course.'

'Of course!' Boots echoed.

She glared at him; then leaned forward with her chin cupped in her hands. 'But it isn't any fun,' she protested. 'You just sit there and they talk at you ——'

'And you've got to think the way they tell you to,' Ricky supplemented. 'That's right! — I don't like it either!'

'Really?' Robin looked interested.

'It's much more exciting to find things out for yourself,' he said.

Poppet beamed. 'Then we can stay at home, can't we?'

Long, beautiful, school-less vistas before them; lovely, bright days unfettered by schedules. The Kiplings were suddenly fascinated by the thought. Would it be possible? Why wouldn't it — what was there to hinder them?

But Mrs. McMasters had her own ideas on the subject: 'Oh, no, you can't!' she said amiably. 'You go to school — or you get out of my basement.'

Poppet was upset. She went into the bathroom and flushed the toilet several times in rapid succession, so that there was a terrific groaning sound in all the pipes. She did this quite often to relieve her feelings; she always hoped that something important would burst...

Mrs. McMasters, casually ignoring the uproar, turned her attention to Ricky: 'How do you find things out for yourself?' she wanted to know.

'Oh — watching, and reading ——' He became suddenly vague.

'Reading what?'

'History books, and biographies. And magazines, of course.'

'These,' Robin inserted, indicating a somewhat grubby pile on the grocery-box bookcase.

'We get them in back yards,' Boots reported. 'People throw them away with the garbage, and Poppet and I bring them home with us. In a bag.'

'Good idea!' she commented. 'And what've you been reading about lately?'

Ricky thought for a moment. 'Well, there's a lot of war stuff. That's interesting.' He leaned forward a bit: 'You know,' he told her, 'it's crazy the way people've messed things up — you'd think they were idiots! Silly little squabbles, and getting mad, and getting scared, and getting swelled heads, and telling lies to one another, and grabbing—— Honest! it gives you a pain in the neck!' He felt, as he spoke, suddenly and violently impatient. What right had people to be so stupid!

'But wars,' Robin half-protested; 'they do sound sort of wonderful. You know — riding into battle, and flags, and things like that!' In her heart of hearts she still clung to those old pictures, those old valiant pictures: the Crusades, Boadicea in her chariot, Joan and Richard and Henry of Navarre ...

Ricky turned on her quite savagely: 'They ought not to!' he snapped. 'You know they ought not to! Killing people isn't wonderful, is it!...' Then he stopped short, and wished, as he often wished, that he could get serious without sounding so humiliatingly banal. He opened one of the magazines: 'Politics,' he read, flicking the pages back and forth. 'Marco Polo. Scenes in Toulon — they're woodcuts. Astronomy ——'

'That's about the stars,' Boots explained.

'Thank you,' said Mrs. McMasters.

'Book reviews. The City of the Future ——' He showed her a picture of it: great buildings etched against the sky like white cathedrals. 'All the traffic goes underneath, see? Through tunnels. And there are gardens on the roofs. And there's no dirt and no noise.' He wondered that somebody hadn't thought of it sooner. Then several more titles: 'Traveling in China. New Art Exhibits. Birth Control ——'

'Really! And what do you think of that?'

'Birth control?'

'Yes.'

'Oh, I'm for it. Aren't you?'

She shrugged her shoulders.

'Of course,' he granted, 'there's something on the other side. They have a debate here.'

'What's birth control?' Boots wanted to know.

'It's supposed to keep people from having too many children,' Robin explained, a trifle sketchily. 'If they're poor, you see, it makes it sort of expensive.'

'And, besides, some people don't want any.'

'I don't,' Poppet informed them from the bathroom.

'Mimsy does,' Boots counteracted. 'She's going to have two of each when she grows up.' He thought that quite dramatic.

Mrs. McMasters glanced across the room at Mimsy, but she didn't say anything. Robin noticed that, just as she noticed the momentary, scarcely perceptible change of expression on her face. Mrs. McMasters liked Boots; and she liked Poppet; and she liked Ricky — in spite of the spirited clashes of opinion they were always having; but in her attitude towards Mimsy there was a subtle difference. It was as if she desired very much to regard her as insignificant, as relatively negligible; and yet, at the same time, was forced to pay the grudging homage of envy to one who held within herself the mysterious and unassailable advantage of beauty...

They stood at the top of the three steps, with the silver advertisement flashing on and off above them.

'How's your money?' Mrs. McMasters inquired.

'Getting pretty low.'

'Hm!' She shifted a little, and her taffeta dress crackled in the stillness. 'You'll be surprised, I suppose — but after this week I won't want you any more in the dining-room.'

Robin stared at her. 'You won't want me any more!'

'I hired a new waitress this morning.'

'Oh!' Her face was suddenly blank.

'I've got to have somebody who doesn't smash dishes every time she turns round. It's a bit too expensive.'

Robin was silent.

'Well — why don't you burst into tears?'

The words stung her. 'If you don't want me, I'll go! There are plenty of other things to do.'

'All right. Only keep calm about it.'

'I am keeping calm ——' And then her dismay suddenly flared into anger: 'Why won't you stop making fun of us!'

'Making fun of you? God forbid! I think you're a noble little herd.'

'Oh, no, you don't! You just stand round waiting for us to flunk. But we won't! We'll show you ——'

'Exactly. You've said that before. But what are you going to do when you leave me?'

'That's our business.'

'All right, please yourself.' She put her foot on the first step, then half-turned: 'It doesn't matter, of course — but I was just going to say that I need an assistant.'

Robin's eyes widened in the lamplight. 'Then you were making fun of me again!'

'Not at all. You went up in the air before I had a chance to tell you.'

She lifted her chin doggedly. 'I don't know that I want to be your assistant. I said I'd go — and maybe I'd better!'

Mrs. McMasters leaned forward and spoke in a curt, deliberate voice: 'Don't be a little fool!' she said. 'You've got spunk, but there's no need to show it off. Where d'you think you'll live? In the public library? And what about the rest of your outfit? That painted bedlam suits them all right, doesn't it?' She paused for a moment; and then, 'As a matter of fact,' she remarked, 'I'd like you to stay.'

Robin was surprised. She stopped staring haughtily at the stars, and stared instead at the bulky figure on the steps. And suddenly, in a spurt of intuition, it came to her that perhaps there was nothing in the world Mrs. McMasters wanted more than to see the Kiplings make good. It was a most astonishing thought! Her anger fell away before it, trivial and superfluous...

'What kind of work will it be?' she asked.

'Different things. I'll explain Monday morning.'

'All right.'

They sounded casual — as if they were discussing the weather.

'It'll be good training for you,' Mrs. McMasters mentioned. 'Later on you'll probably want to start your own boarding-house.'

But Robin cocked her head quickly. 'Oh, no!' she said.

'I'm going to do something much more important than *that* ...'

5

First of all it had been nothing but a sort of *feeling* — a feeling that took possession of him, that swept through and through him like a wind. Then, gradually and excitingly, the feeling had resolved itself into words: little groups of words, phrases and fragmentary passages that assumed their forms with a meticulous delicacy, or sprang out, all in a moment, as spray springs out of an agitated sea. This was the most fascinating part of the familiar process; but it was a part that held danger as well as delight, for it was so easy, so perilously easy, to stop here — to let the words sparkle through his head, leap into lovely patterns, dance themselves out in a secret carnival of beauty...

But to-night he had roused himself to capture them; he had written and written, slowly, drudgingly. And now it was finished — the poem to Yseult.

For a little while he sat quite still, conscious of nothing but a great calmness and a great contentment. The words had stopped leaping through his head. Those that he wanted were imprisoned on the paper in front of him, caught there forever and ever; and all the rest of them had gone away. Everything else seemed to have gone away. He felt empty — and it was a beautiful feeling.

Poem to Yseult. It was finished! It was wonderful and entrancing; it was lovely beyond all other loveliness in the world.

'The sea comes whispering round your feet,
The birds fly low and sing to you...'

It didn't matter how long he had written, how slowly and drudgingly. It didn't matter in the least now...

Robin wandered through the doorway. She was in her pajamas, with a toothbrush in one hand and a glass of water in the other. 'Hello,' she said. 'Have you finished?'

He nodded, and drew his arm slowly across his eyes.

'Is it the Burke theme?'

'Burke? Oh — no, I forgot that.'

She looked interested. 'A poem?'

He nodded again.

'May I read it, Ricky?'

He folded the paper up quickly. 'No,' he said; then, less abruptly, 'It isn't any good.'

She balanced herself on the edge of the table, and began to scrub her teeth ...

'Robin,' Mimsy called, 'shall I put another blanket on Boots?'

'All right. On his legs ——'

Ricky unfolded the paper again:

'The sea comes whispering round your feet,
The birds fly low and sing to you...'

Ah, but it was lovely! He stared at it for a moment, scarcely conscious of the desire that was shaping itself within him; and then his heart began to thump with excitement, for he knew, quite suddenly, that he wanted to show the poem to Robin, wanted to hear her say that it was beautiful — beautiful! The delicate reticence which had always hung like a mist between Yseult and the actualities of the outer world was pierced for the first time by this sharp longing for applause.

'Here ——' he said, holding out the paper. Then he went into the bathroom and sat down behind the door on the edge of the tub. He was trembling. He was breathless with suspense. Little doubts began to buzz through his head, little stinging doubts: perhaps, after all, it wasn't beautiful; perhaps it was silly; perhaps, at this very moment, Robin was thinking, 'This is a silly poem!' and was feeling bored — or, worse than that, was laughing at it! 'Oh, please don't let her laugh,' he prayed, in a sudden panic. 'Please, please, don't let her laugh ...'

Then he got up abruptly, and fumbled his way out of the darkness.

Robin was still balanced on the table, with the poem in one hand and the toothbrush in the other. 'I love it!' she said, looking up.

He took a deep, quivering breath.

'Who's Yseult?'

'Oh — nobody. It's just a name.'

'It sounds sort of Mimsy-ish. Fair hair, and everything.'

He felt inexplicably upset at the idea: 'Of course it isn't Mimsy!'

She was bending over the paper again. 'It's like a song,' she told him. 'It's beautiful ——'

'Yes!' he said. 'It *is* — isn't it?'

She lifted her head and stared at him for a moment, serious-eyed. 'I think you're going to be a great poet, Ricky.' It was the first time she had ever put this into words.

'Yes!' he said again. 'I think so, too!' And he could have wept for happiness, a radiant, triumphant happiness that had in it very little of the pettiness or pomposity of conceit...

They were both silent for a while, letting their thoughts float upward, luminous, bubble-like — up and up into wide, bright spaces. Then Robin remembered something: 'The Burke theme! What are you going to do about it?'

Ricky came back to earth with an air of temporarily forsaking realities for shadows. 'I don't know ——' He looked vague. 'He'll just have to bawl me out, I suppose.'

She made a sudden suggestion: 'Why don't you give him the poem instead?'

'Oh, no! Of course not!'

'I wish you would ——'

'Oh, no! I couldn't do that!'

'But, my goodness, Ricky! he'd be terribly pleased. He probably doesn't even know you can write poems.'

He shook his head. 'I couldn't, Robin — honest, I couldn't!'

But the idea appealed to her. 'Anybody can scribble off an old theme,' she pointed out. 'This is different. It's something you've made up by yourself. It's *important*, Ricky!'

He shoved his hands into his pockets and stared at the floor.

'You meant to do the Burke thing, didn't you?'

'Yes.'

'Only you thought of this instead.'

'Yes.'

'Well, tell him that. Tell him how it happened.'

He didn't answer; and after a moment or two Robin leaned forward, still grasping the paper and the toothbrush. 'Why,' she demanded, 'should you get bawled out when you've done something beautiful — like this?'

Ricky went on staring at the floor; but inside he had begun, very delicately, to toy with the suggestion, and the longer he toyed with it, the less outrageous it appeared to be. After all, why shouldn't he give his poem to Old Patterson? It was a lovely poem — lovelier than anything he had ever written before. Old Patterson would be tremendously surprised, tremendously impressed. Of course he would! He didn't know the stuff that he, Ricky, was made of. He didn't know, perhaps he didn't have the faintest idea, that there was a poet in his class!

A Poet — a Poet! There was something intoxicating in the very word. He was a Poet! He could do beautiful things — things a thousand times more wonderful and more important than dull old themes.

'Yes!' he said suddenly. 'Why shouldn't I give it to him!'

He had forgotten all about Yseult...

'Robin,' Mimsy called again, 'aren't you coming?'

'In a minute ——'

'Oh, *no!*' Ricky protested. 'Don't go to bed! Let's do something!'

'What?' she asked, interested.

'I don't know — something *silly!*' He felt extraordinarily alert and buoyant; he felt as if he were finished with sleep for the rest of his life. 'Come on!' he implored. 'Please, Robin ——'

Her eyes began to sparkle. 'Hey, Mimsy!'

'Yes?'

'We're going on the bust!'

'On the what?'

'Bust! Want to come?'

'Who's going on the bust?' Poppet's voice inquired thickly.

'Anybody who wants to!'

There was a muffled thud in the next room, and Poppet came staggering through the doorway, her hair on end. 'Boots, too?' she suggested.

'Oh, no,' protested Mimsy. 'He's fast asleep ——'

But Poppet, making a dizzy dive for Boots's bed, landed on his stomach with a wallop.

'*Ow!*' he howled — and his eyes flew open, round as saucers.

'You were snoring,' she informed him severely.

'I — was — not!' he denied, and promptly went to sleep again.

She bounced up and down: 'Hey, Bootsy — *Boots!* We're going on the bust!'

He wakened, but looked drowsily skeptical; so, grasping his pajamas in both hands, she hauled him out of bed.

'Hello!' Ricky said. 'Greetings!'

Boots rocked back and forth, fat, flushed, and somewhat rumpled-looking. 'Hello,' he returned; then, perceiving authentic signs of excitement: 'I'm going on the bust, too!'

'We needn't get dressed,' Robin decided airily. 'We can shove our pajamas up and wear coats ——'

But Ricky was in a mood for absurdities. He plunged into the clothes-closet and came out again wearing an old waterproof cape that belonged to nobody in particular, and Mimsy's summer hat — a large, floppy affair with a wreath of cotton daisies. He minced up and down in front of them, using an umbrella as a cane and a spoon off the table as a monocle. He was funny — he was irresistibly funny! The rest of the Kiplings roared with laughter!

'Will you go out like that, Ricky? Will you?'

'Sure!' he said recklessly. In his present frame of mind he would have gone out in a newspaper if any one had suggested it.

Poppet was prancing with excitement. 'Let's all dress up!' she shouted. 'Come on, Boots — you wear my things!'

'I will not!' he refused, dignified if dazed.

But she was cheerfully relentless. She put her coat on him, backwards, and perched her hat on the top of his head — a little, round hat held on by an elastic band. She was charmed with the effect. 'Oh!' she told him, 'you *do* look crazy ——'

The room was aflare with noise now. They were all rushing round and getting into something-or-other, the more outlandish the better.

'From every kind of man,' warbled Ricky at the top of his lungs, 'obedience I expect! I'm the Emperor of Japan ——'

'And I'm his daughter-in-law-elect!' Poppet and Robin and Mimsy burst forth gustily from various parts of the basement.

'So bow — bow — to his daughter-in-law-elect...'

The chimes of the corner church began to drop slow notes through the uproar — ten, eleven, twelve. 'Midnight!' Boots announced. A magical hour!

They were all ready now, so up into the street they swarmed, pell-mell, hilarious — and brightly expectant, as if they were prepared to find some astounding and joyous adventure waiting for them at the top of the three steps. But there was nothing there — and nothing as far as they could see.

It was Monday morning, and very quiet.

Overhead there were stars, millions of them — silver, pale gold, a scattering of amethyst-colored ones farther away; and underneath the stars there were leagues of emptiness, and then the houses — looming up on either side of the road, black, massive, and patched here and there with squares of orange light — and the stone steps, dropping in solid precision to deserted pavements that were periodically blotched with the harsh radiance of street-lamps...

The Kiplings came to an abrupt halt. They were arrested by the silence and solemnity of it all; their gayety wavered.

'What,' Boots inquired, 'are we going to do?'

They hadn't considered this point.

'We could ring everybody's doorbell,' Poppet suggested.

But they wanted something wonderful, something tremendously exciting and humorous.

But what?

They didn't know. They felt suddenly blank — and a little foolish.

'Ricky,' Robin whispered, 'can you think of anything?'

'No,' he said. 'Can't you?'

She shook her head.

For several minutes they stood there on the pavement in the glare of Our Moon — looking clownish, fantastically alien to the somber street, with one another's hats on and their pajama legs coming unrolled. For several minutes they waited, but nothing happened; and gradually they realized that nothing was going to happen. Some spell had been broken. Their hilarity dwindled away as mysteriously as it had flared up; the bright flame of expectancy flickered out, leaving them disappointed, thwarted, vaguely resentful.

Where was the adventure for which they had primed themselves?

Turning, they went back into the basement...

Ricky's eyes were wide open in the darkness.

He was restless and rebellious. Why didn't things happen when you wanted them to? Why, when you were all prepared for something wonderful, holding out your hands for it — waiting — waiting — why was there nothing but a blank wall of silence and solemnity?

But after a while, through this cacophony of resentment, other thoughts began to filter back to him — delicate, soothing, like remembered music. There had been nothing for him, or for any of them, at the top of the three steps; but inside himself it was different. Innumerable adventures lurked there, hidden like jewels in the limitless caverns of his mind, waiting for him to discover them — as he had discovered the poem, as he had discovered Yseult herself. They came from he didn't quite know where, from some secret and luminous and richly abundant source. Adventures that were found not in public but in private, not outside but within...

He went to sleep later on, and dreamed a vivid, chaotic dream:

He was standing in front of thousands of people, and they were all clapping and cheering. 'Ricky!' they were shouting. 'Ricky — Ricky!' The Duke was there, with an enormous medal on his coat; and the girl was there — only farther off, rather shadowy and elusive, with her golden hair hanging over her shoulders like a long, silken veil. He waved to them; and they waved back in return. They loved him, they were proud of him! He flung out his arms and spoke to the multitude of people: 'From every kind of man,' he cried, 'obedience I expect! I'm the Poet of Japan ——' And, 'Hurray!' they all thundered, clapping their hands above their heads so that the air, as far as he could see, was full of a fluttering movement. 'It's beautiful!' they told him, their voices rising higher and higher like the sound of the wind. 'Beautiful — beautiful — beautiful ——'

6

Ricky had thrown his schoolbooks on a chair and gone into the bathroom, locking the door after him. He had been there now for almost fifteen minutes.

Robin suddenly stopped pretending to herself that she was doing Mrs. McMasters's accounts. She got up and rattled the doorknob. 'Ricky!'

There was no answer, but the abrupt turning on of a faucet.

'*Ricky!*'

'Yes ——'

'What's the matter?'

'Nothing ——'

She brushed that aside: 'It's your poem, isn't it?'

He began to splash his hands in the water, making a great noise.

'Ricky! Please!'

'Oh — go away!' he shouted.

She was suddenly and acutely distressed. 'Didn't he like it?'

The tap was turned off again, leaving a dull stillness in the basement.

'Didn't he?' she persisted.

On the other side of the door Ricky was holding his head in his arms. 'No ——' he mumbled.

She thought he was crying, and the idea sharpened her distress into consternation. 'What happened — tell me what happened!' She shook the knob again, noisily, so that the painted door shivered between them.

Ricky mumbled something about '—mad!'

'Who was mad? Patterson?'

'Yes,' he said; and suddenly his voice became harsh with anguish: 'He bawled me out! He talked about it, in front of everybody ——'

Old Patterson, etched in strong strokes against the blackboard: 'And so you didn't feel in the mood for doing a theme, eh? Thought you'd rather write a lovesick poem. Ten lines! Ten lines of work ——'

'If you don't shut up, I'll kill you, I'll kill you!' over and over again inside his head, like the roar of an incoming tide.

'You think you're somebody special, don't you? *You* don't have to bother about rules! *You* don't have to take any notice of assignments! Just scribble off any sentimental trash ——'

Sitting very still. Holding about himself an air of insolent indifference; holding it high, flaunting it like a flag.

Old Patterson, goaded by his aloofness, leaning forward with the poem in his hands ——

'He read it!' Ricky said passionately. 'He read it, in front of every one!'

'The sea comes whispering round your feet,
The birds fly low and sing to you...'

The eyes of the class veering towards him. Hundreds, thousands of eyes!

And then, that shuddering, terrifying sense of isolation — that sense of being stranded in a strange place in the midst of strange creatures from whom he was mysteriously, immeasurably, alienated. A tragic feeling; and, underneath it, more tragic still, the torturing realization that he had betrayed Yseult ...

Robin spoke against the door: 'Where is the poem?' she asked.

'I tore it up.'

'Oh, Ricky!'

Into little pieces, little meaningless pieces that no one would ever be able to put together...

She felt suddenly and savagely angry. Damn Patterson! She kept on gritting the words over to herself — damn him and damn him! He stood out jaggedly in her thought: he was a fool, he was old and ruthless and blind; and safe, too — safe on an established pinnacle of experience, armed with the lash of authority! That was the worst part, the infuriating part! Why should he be able to hurt Ricky like this? Why should he be allowed to ruin beautiful things — things that other people had built up with great care and great joy? It was grotesquely unjust; it was *wicked!*

'Beast!' she said fiercely. 'Rotten old beast!'

She was passing for the first time over ancient ground...

Through the park. Past the bandstand, with its benches swarming with pigeons; under the half-bare trees that were already beginning to take on the subdued mauve tones of winter.

It seemed to Robin that she was riding forward, like one of the knights in the green-and-russet forest. Riding forward, banner aloft and sword in the air — charging against something that she supposed to be age, in the cause of something that she thought to be youth.

Number twenty-three.

A little house: drab, neat, and decidedly inoffensive-looking.

Robin regarded it for a moment, somewhat nonplussed. Because her anger had assumed such heroic proportions, because by now her whole mission had shaped itself into a sort of passionate and romantic adventure, she had, unconsciously, been expecting to come up against something far more pretentious than this. It would have been easy enough to invade a mansion, an arrogant-looking mansion — worthy of the tremendous wrath with which she was armed; but there was something just a trifle ridiculous in the idea of hurling herself against this little house. It was too small, too meek, to storm in a gallant fashion. It was as if she were threatening a molehill with a scimitar...

Then she steeled herself with the thought of Ricky — Ricky tearing his poem into little pieces, Ricky crying behind a locked door.

She marched up the path and punched the bell — vigorously, as if it were Mr. Patterson's face.

A woman appeared in a moment or two, an indefinite-looking woman with a large, pale mouth and great quantities of faded hair hurled into an overwhelming pompadour. 'Yes,' she said, as if answering a question.

'I want to see Mr. Patterson.'

'I'm sorry, he isn't back from school yet.'

'Then I'll wait,' Robin informed her curtly, and marched inside and sat down on the first chair she came to.

'Is there anything I can do ——'

'No,' she said.

So the woman went into the front room, which had a streak of red sunshine across the carpet.

Robin took a deep breath — then let it out again quickly, because the air was bitter with furnace smoke. She glanced around, curious, warily alert.

After the rakish brightness of the basement, the hall struck her as being very dull and very prim. Two chairs; an umbrella-stand and a cotton umbrella; a little table with a starched doily on it, and an empty vase on the doily. Everything seemed to have taken root in its appointed position. It was as if, thousands of years hence, the cotton umbrella would still be leaning in its stand, the empty vase still be stationed in the precise center of the starched doily.

The only beautiful thing, the only vibrant thing, she could see anywhere was the streak of red sunshine across the carpet.

The drabness grated on her; and something else, more subtle than the drabness, something which, without being able to analyze, she revolted against swiftly and instinctively. A sense of placidity, stagnation: a feeling that nothing had happened in the house for a very long time.

The woman was darning in the other room. She got up after a moment and pulled the shade down halfway, because the sunshine was in her eyes...

Robin moved restlessly. She was irritated at having to sit here like this, waiting for the enemy to return so that she could attack him. It was so — so unpicturesque!

She began to marshal the scattered phrases in her head into some sort of order: 'How dare you hurt my brother! How dare you! Just because you're old, you think you can do anything. You're crabbed and sour! A fool! That's what you are! A fool ——' But the words sounded pedantic, inadequate, and her attention kept straying from them to other things, trivial little things: the carefully darned curtain drawn across the narrow window in the door, the oilcloth on the stairs, the twisted hook over the umbrella-stand, and then — the picture.

It was a medium-sized picture, a portrait, hanging inconspicuously at the farther end of the hall. It was a boy's face — smooth, candid, as young as Ricky's. His hair was glossy and flat, as if it had just been brushed very hard; his mouth was grave, his eyes expectant.

Robin stared up at him, surprised. 'Hello!' she almost said. 'What are *you* doing here?' For he didn't belong in this place, quite obviously he didn't. He was of another world, her world...

Then there were sounds outside: footsteps crunching on the path, creaking across the porch. The front door opened, and as Robin stood up abruptly the woman reappeared in the hall, her hands full of needlework.

'There's some one to see you,' she remarked, 'and the furnace has gone wrong again.'

Old Patterson dropped a satchel of themes on the table. 'But I told you to shake it if ——'

'I did,' she said. And went back into the room.

He took his hat off, and hung it on the hook over the umbrella-stand; he took his coat off, and folded it methodically. The light from the narrow window fell on his face as he moved. It fell on his hair — dull, and flat as if it had just been brushed.

He turned to Robin. 'Yes?' he inquired.

She stared at him — dumbfounded.

He waited, his shoulders hunched forward a little. Then, 'Yes?' he repeated, not curiously, or even with interest, but as if he were merely impatient to settle whatever she was there for as rapidly as possible.

She began to stammer something about the furnace: '— If you'd rather fix the furnace ——' She was shocked, bewildered. She could feel all the furious invectives she had been hoarding for this encounter streaming away from her, as water might stream through her fingers.

'You're not in a hurry?'

She shook her head.

So he went down the hall, his feet making a slapping sound on the oilcloth...

Robin stood motionless for a moment. Her eyes were raised to the boy in the picture. 'Oh!' she said, 'what happened to you? *What happened to you?*'

Turning with an abrupt movement, she left the house.

The sun was going down in splendor, and the sky, the pond, even the faces of the people passing back and forth in front of her were given a beautiful luminosity by the reddish light.

Robin sat very still, sharing her bench with three pigeons and a sparrow.

She was caught up in a large, poetic emotion. She was full of a tremendous desire to understand things — all the secret and tragic and bewildering things in the world. What happened to people? What were the mysterious links that chained the boy in the picture to the man who had hurt Ricky? She wanted to know; wanted to understand...

But there was one thing she did know now. It was stupid to have hated Old Patterson. She felt sure of that; and she felt sure, beautifully sure, that she would never be able to hate any one again.

Instead of the anger of an hour ago, she felt a new, wide tenderness, an almost dramatic tenderness that made her want to throw out her arms and comfort everybody — everywhere. Ricky crying alone, and Old Patterson who had once been like Ricky, and the woman, and the pale girl across the path, and the little boy weeping beside the pond...

Everybody — everywhere.

It was a large and poetic feeling.

But, after a while, her thoughts began to narrow inward. These strange and mysterious things that happened to people — what were they? She wondered suddenly if they would happen to her, and to the rest of the Kiplings. Perhaps, when they were old...

She was startled by the suggestion, frightened. 'Oh, *no!*' she said.

Of course not — of course not! They would never change as the boy in the picture had changed; they would never lose themselves like that! They were strong — stronger than any of the Things that could happen to them!

Gigantic flames of color were leaping over her, higher and higher, scorching the whole sky. The park was full of a burning light; the feathers of the pigeons were sheened with it, even the little sparrow was glossy.

Robin could feel the brightness against her eyes, in her empty hands. Beautiful sunshine, warm and powerful and radiant! A sudden courage flared up within her. The Kiplings were all right! They weren't going to let themselves be withered and beaten, as Old Patterson had. Of course they weren't. The very idea was fantastic!

She wasn't afraid of the Things that were going to happen! She felt ready for them — whatever they were.

7

A cold wind had blown up from the sea, rumpling the clouds into a delicate whirl of snow.

Robin got out of bed and lit one of the candles on the table, moving softly so as not to waken the others.

The extra blankets were kept on the top shelf of the cupboard, beside the Duke's medal — very carefully wrapped up in a piece of velvet — and the somewhat dilapidated box containing the souvenirs from the Lovely Summer, and a silver star, and a cardboard hat, and a pair of wings with tinsel that was crushed now and turning smelly and brownish-colored...

Robin pulled down the blankets and threw one of them over her shoulders like a cape — a red one, the discarded robe of Marie Antoinette; then, carrying the others across her arm, and holding the candle in her hand, she tip-toed through the basement.

Boots first, flushed and serene and snoring a bit: a little boy with gravely curved lips and long, golden lashes.

And next to him, Ricky — with his dark hair thrown against the pillow in a tumbled mass. Even while he slept, there was something proud, something sensitive and intense in Ricky's face. He had none of the tranquillity that belonged to Boots just now; and it seemed to Robin, as she bent over him in the candlelight, that Ricky had somehow forfeited tranquillity, that he had pledged himself to a fine and ardent restlessness that would carry him forever, on and on, down secret ways and lonely ways, towards a splendid goal that he could only faintly see...

Then Mimsy, with her cheek pressed on her hand and her pale hair flowing loosely like a golden veil. She stirred — and Robin paused to watch her settle down again. Mimsy did things so beautifully, even trivial, unimportant little things. She was full of grace and graciousness...

And then Poppet, sprawled out between crumpled sheets — Poppet with her willful mouth and her black hair in a tangle. Robin tried to cover her arms up, but she jerked them free, impetuously, half-defiantly. She wakened a little, and smiled a drowsy, wavering smile. 'Hey ——' she said, but her voice wandered off. She was asleep again...

Robin got back into bed, putting the candle beside her on a chair. There was just a small bit of wax left now, just a small pointed flame; in a moment it would flicker out, quietly, delicately.

She lay there with her eyes open, watching it...

And as the shadows closed over the flame, a bell suddenly chimed out, sharp and startling across the sleeping city; then another one — and another — and several more close at hand. Hollow bells, clangorous bells, bells that chittered and boomed and jangled; bells at the corner, beyond the park, from every tower and spire and dome that soared against the sky. Then the long, shrill hiss of a whistle; the bellow of horns; the scream and shriek of far-off sirens in the harbor. Louder! Louder! Rumbling and wailing and caroling in the night! Flags of noise flaring through the darkness! Louder — louder — laughing and crying — the voice of the city saluting Peace.

PART THREE

TIME OF WINDS

PART THREE

TIME OF WINDS

I

It was April.

Everything wore an air of exquisite delicacy and fragility. The road in front of them was striped with soft, slanting shadows; and the woods springing up on either side of the road were full of amber-colored sunshine, full of reddish buds and little pale leaves.

'Here,' Poppet decided.

So Henry drew up, promptly obedient as usual.

Boots swung himself out of the rumble-seat, which he had been occupying in solitary state, and tested the ground. 'Mush,' he observed.

Poppet turned her head lazily. 'Hello! I thought I heard you fall out several miles ago. What's mush?'

'The ground. We can't sit on it.'

'Perhaps,' Henry suggested, 'we could find a log, or something ——'

They left the car and wandered into the wood. It was very quiet, very still. Their feet sank into thick, spongy layers of last year's leaves; above them the branches were netted against a vivid sky and against the luminous clouds that were floating in the sky — so large and bright that they appeared to be casting down a special radiance of their own. There was little underbrush, so that the slim, soaring grace of the trunks was seldom broken; there were no flowers and no grass — just the matted leaves, spicing the air with an odor that was more autumnal than springlike in its pungency.

They came to a creek. There was a sunny space near it, a small hollow ringed about with maple saplings and white birches. It seemed fairly dry here, so they sat down...

Henry took his gloves off. 'Will they be long, d'you think?'

'Oh, I don't suppose so. He just had to collect Robin and Denis-whatever-his-name-is — Bear.'

'Bayard,' Boots corrected.

'Thanks, darling ——' She leaned back on her elbows, her legs crossed.

Henry put his gloves in his pocket. 'He's the new chap at Meredith's, isn't he?'

'Mm — a stranger within our gates, and so on. We'd better stand in a row and chirp "Welcome" ——'

They sat silent for several minutes. Nothing moved but the bright clouds: the hush was so deep about them that it seemed as if they would be able to hear a leaf turn, or a shadow shift...

After a while a car stopped in the road, and there was a loud halloo.

They all got up again.

Poppet waved, and shouted: 'Over here! Follow the dotted line ——'

In a moment or two figures appeared between the trees, moving in and out of the green shadows and amber lights.

'Where's Robin?' Boots called.

'Coming later.'

'Why?'

Ricky was carrying half a dozen lunch-boxes. 'Because the Tavern, as far as I could make out, is again on the verge of bankruptcy. She had to stop and save the situation.' He reached the hollow, and dumped the boxes on the ground. 'This is part of my family, Denis. And that's Henry Prescott. Is it dry here?'

'More or less. Welcome to our hearth, Mr. Bear!'

'Bayard,' Boots corrected. 'Glad to meet you.' He held his hand out.

'Of course,' Poppet corroborated. 'Charmed! And what are your first impressions of the Kipling flivver?'

Bayard laughed. 'I'd rather not talk about it,' he decided. 'I pushed it up the hills, and ran after it down them.'

'And the horn,' Ricky appended, 'for some reason or other, is no longer with us. So if anything gets in your way you have to yodel.'

'How's Robin going to get out here?' Boots inquired.

'I don't know. She'll borrow a car, probably. Smoke, Denis?'

'Thanks ——'

Poppet sat down again. 'I'm Poppet,' she informed Bayard. 'I don't believe anybody mentioned the fact. I hope you'll like me. I'm really rather charming, aren't I, Ricky?'

'Fairly — by dint of long association with the rest of us.'

'Boots is nice, too,' she granted. 'That's Boots. But he's apt to be ponderous. If you ever get caught alone with him, he'll tell you all about his plans for establishing world peace. They're most gripping!'

'Your *legs!*' Boots said. 'Don't wind them — they look awful!'

She unwound them.

'Poppet's legs,' Ricky explained, 'are a Major Problem. She does extraordinary things with them when she's acting ——'

'I got a press-notice about them once,' Poppet inserted brightly.

'— so we're trying to bully her into gracefulness.' He leaned against a birch, his hands thrust in his pockets. 'By the way, how many passes have you for to-morrow?'

'Three.'

'Then Denis could come along, couldn't he?'

'Sure. Delighted.'

'Thanks very much,' Bayard acknowledged. 'But — where? Or is it a secret?'

'"The Snag,"' she elaborated. 'First performance of it. The author's going to be present; and Irene Craven's the guest star; and dear old Clumington dies in the third act — that's always poignant. He reels down to the footlights and makes a noise like a cow.'

'And what do you do?'

'Oh, nothing much. But I do it very fetchingly, don't I, Boots?'

'You're better than you were last year,' he conceded.

'He's curbing his enthusiasm,' she explained, 'because he doesn't want me to get a swelled head.'

'*Get* one — !' said Boots.

She grinned at him amiably; then, 'You will come, won't you?'

'Rather!' Bayard agreed. 'With such a galaxy of attractions.'

'It'll be amusing,' she promised. 'The family feels frightfully swell on first nights. They all turn up in the front row. They take a childish joy in the front row. I suppose it's because we spent our youth in second balconies, with misprinted programs, and milk-chocolate machines...'

Ricky wandered down to the creek. He stood there by himself, staring idly into the amber depths of the wood. How still it was! Not the solemn stillness of autumn, but a delicate hush that seemed to be undertoned with all sorts of small, secret sounds. The little trees wore an air of innocent expectancy; they were like children, waiting with uplifted arms for some beautiful and mysterious adventure to be completed. He put out a hand and touched one of them, smoothing his fingers across the bark...

Boots opened a lunch-box and helped himself to a sandwich. 'I wonder if Robin'll get here?'

'Oh, I hope so. Have you met Robin yet, Denis?'

He shook his head.

'She's grand, isn't she, Boots?'

'Mm,' Boots agreed, munching.

'So Ricky says. And you've another sister, haven't you?'

'Yes — Mimsy. She's traipsing round Europe, lucky dog! With the Widdernesses ——' She minced the words out with a certain relish: 'Mrs. and Mr. Ambrose Widderness.

The sort of people who have done nothing, with great elegance, since birth. They think we're hooligans!'

'They don't think at all,' Boots corrected. 'They just know things — automatically.'

'Isn't he discerning!' Poppet applauded. 'It must be the effect of college. He never used to be bright ——'

A large, pompous-looking limousine came tearing down the road, passed the parked cars, drew up with a shriek of brakes, turned, and came tearing back again.

'Good Lord!' Boots said. 'Look at the bus she's come in!'

They all stood up.

'Hey!' Robin's voice called. 'Where are you?'

'Over here ——'

They could see her in a moment or two, coming through the brown and silver trees, moving lightly, with a basket under one arm and her yellow dress penciled with the thin shadows of interlacing branches. Halfway to the hollow she paused, looking about, sniffing the pungent air. 'What a lovely wood!'

'Yes, isn't it,' agreed Ricky.

'Where did you get the car?' Boots demanded.

She started towards them again. 'Mrs. Somebody-or-other — she was at the Tavern. Isn't it swanky? It has vases of flowers inside, and silk curtains.'

Poppet leaned forward a little: 'Do I, or do I not,' she inquired, 'see something following you?'

'You do. It's a dog.'

'Whose?'

'I really don't know.'

'Oh, Robin — now what have you done?'

She reached the hollow and deposited the basket beside the lunch-boxes. 'We can return him on our way home,' she explained. 'Ken — Ken — whatever it is. That slummy street. He was sitting by himself on a garbage-pail, and I thought it would do him good to get into the country. I don't believe he's ever seen it before.' She knelt down on the leaves and clicked her fingers: 'Come on, Fido ——'

Fido regarded her uneasily. He was a small, ragged dog, wearing the air of one who isn't quite sure what is going to happen to him next.

'Play, little creature, play!' Poppet encouraged. 'She's brought you out to enjoy yourself ——'

Ricky introduced Denis. 'I've been cracking you up to one another,' he said. 'So I hope you'll get along all right.'

Robin sat back on her heels, her head tilted a little. 'Shall we?' she asked Bayard.

'Perhaps we'd better — to oblige him.'

'I'm not very interesting,' she warned.

'Quite so!' Poppet concurred. 'You're an island of mediocrity in a surrounding sea of brilliance. You needn't glare at me, Boots. I didn't make it up — it's plucked from the play.' She began to open the lunch-boxes. 'How's the Tavern, Robin? Ricky seemed to think it was collapsing.'

'Oh, it's safe, thanks. I put something in the wrong column —— Hello, Henry!'

'Hello,' said Henry, grateful for small attentions.

She looked round expectantly: 'Aren't you going to build a fire?'

'What for?'

'I don't know. I thought people always built fires on picnics.'

'She read Boy Scout stories in her youth,' explained Poppet, uncorking the pickles. 'Come, my friends! We'd better eat, drink, and be merry for I've got a rehearsal at eight o'clock ——'

Everybody sat down. Sandwiches were passed; punch was poured out of thermos bottles into paper cups. Fido, trying very hard to be nonchalant, but obviously confused by the lack of cats, clamor, and street-cars, squatted beside Ricky. His eyes were golden in the sunshine, beautifully luminous under his ragged ears...

Robin took a deep breath. 'Isn't this fun!' she said, with her mouth full.

'Mm, swell ——'

'Your legs,' Boots mentioned.

Poppet unwound them.

Ricky gave Fido half his sandwich. 'We've asked Denis to come along with us to-morrow night, Robin.'

'To the play? Good!' — she nodded to Bayard. 'It'll be frightfully exciting, you know. The author's going to be there!'

Poppet made a rueful grimace. 'We're all,' she confessed, 'miserably addicted to hero-worship. It's our most prominent vice. Whenever a celebrity appears on the scene, you'll find us lined up with autograph-books — goggle-eyed — chugging with emotion. Robin's the worst, of course.'

'I know it,' Robin admitted cheerfully. 'An egg, please ——'

'Tarvin,' Boots remarked in a speculative voice. 'Rand Tarvin! I wonder what his real name is?'

'Snoots,' suggested Henry, and collapsed into silence again with an apologetic air of having interrupted an important discourse.

Ricky was scratching Fido's ears. 'What do you think of the play?' he asked Poppet.

'It rehearses well.' She sat back, munching thoughtfully for a moment. 'It's suave, and sort of — pitiless. Sophisticates in super-civilized situations. That kind of thing.'

'Full of bitter epigrams and fashionable infidelities?'

'No — not bitter. Really not at all bitter.' She paused, as if trying to stabilize several shifting impressions: 'Everybody's disillusioned, you see, but it's a sort of — of — gusty disillusionment. Take me — Brenda. I'm a cynical little egg, but I have a grand time!'

'You would,' Boots observed. 'Another sandwich, Robin?'

'Thanks ——'

'What's the author like?' Bayard inquired.

'We don't know yet. He was supposed to be on hand for rehearsals, but never turned up. He's been in England — unavoidably detained, and so on.'

'Is this his first play?'

'First to be put on professionally, I guess. Craven says he's got a try-out theater of his own somewhere. Runs it in the summer and produces a lot of his own stuff ——' She held her cup out for more punch. 'Terhune's sending a man from New York to see this, so perhaps ——'

'He is!' Robin said. 'I didn't know that!' She was suddenly alert: 'Gosh! maybe he'll be ——'

'Violently struck with my performance,' Poppet intercepted. '"Miss Kipling," he will pant, leaping at me with joy, "you are the very person I have been wearily searching for!" Well'—she tossed the punch off with an airy flourish—'you can never tell, can you...'

The sky was beginning to redden through the branches. The birches were beginning to change from a cool silver to a very delicate pink; they were like fairy trees, lustrous and lovely princesses of the wood, leaning towards one another in little groups among the maples, motionless — but so supple and fragile-looking that it seemed as if the slightest breath of wind would set them all swaying together softly in an elegant and languid dance.

Ricky took the books out of the basket. 'What do you all want?' he asked.

'Something lush,' Poppet decided, 'with larks and eglantine.'

'What about you, Denis?'

'Is Housman in favor?'

'Very much so ——'

'Anything's in favor,' Boots said, 'except Browning and Longfellow and Milton. And Poppet has an objection to Poe — but it's personal.'

'His mustache,' Poppet elucidated. 'It drooped!'

Ricky looked inquiringly at Robin: 'A little blood-and-thunder, m'lady?'

She shook her head. 'Not this afternoon, thank you. I should like something — oh, something sort of — romantic.'

'Dear me!' Poppet lifted her eyebrows. 'Usually,' she explained to Bayard, 'we have to read her "The Charge of the Light Brigade" and "Ballads of the Fleet" and all that sort of thing. Full of warriors and gore.'

'Shut up,' Ricky requested. 'I'm going to start ——'

They were all sprawled out comfortably on the leaves, smoking, watching the light deepen and quiver about them.

'A song of enchantment I sang me there,
In a green-green wood by waters fair...'

Robin lay very still. She loved to hear Ricky read like this; his voice seemed to caress the words, to draw beauty from them as the fingers of a musician drew music from his instrument.

'Widdershins turned I, singing it low,
Watching the wild birds come and go...'

She half-closed her eyes, looking drowsily through an iridescent screen of lashes. It was nice to be here — lying among the April trees at sundown, listening to poems that she had listened to ever so many times before. Through her lashes she could see a great glory descending upon the wood. Magnificent floods of color, scarlet and gold...

Ricky was turning the pages of one of the books, hunting for something.

In the silence Robin began to make up a poem of her own: 'It is as if,' she thought, 'we are all going to be here forever and ever, with the sun always setting and the little maples and birches always holding out their arms, waiting for their leaves.' It seemed impossible that so rich and radiant an hour should ever pass.

'A gentle knight was pricking on the plaine,
Ycladd in mightie armes and silver shielde...'

'The Faërie Queene.' Of course! Ricky always chose the right things.

She opened her eyes again and looked at Ricky. It was queer, she thought, how, in a wood, people always seemed to be especially ordinary or not at all ordinary — either their matter-of-factness, their physical and mental stolidity, was accentuated, or else they became imbued with an indefinable charm, a sort of romantic glamour. Henry, for instance, was ordinary — hopelessly so; he was in the wood, but not of it as Ricky was. Ricky belonged here; he looked beautiful — mysterious — stretched on the brown leaves with his thin face outlined against the pale trunks of the birches. He seemed to belong here so completely that she felt, watching him with languid interest, as if at any moment his ears might become pointed, his eyes turn the deep green of secret pools. And Poppet was beautiful, too — lying flat on her back, with her hands clasped loosely behind her head. She was wearing her red sweater. Red suited Poppet: it emphasized the vividness of her appearance, was a proper accompaniment to her vitality and vivacity. There was something rather nymph-like about her just at present. A sophisticated nymph, with long, crimson lips and musing eyes...

Her attention wandered back to the poem for a while:

'A lovely ladie rode him faire beside,
Upon a lowly asse more white then snow,
Yet she much whiter, but the same did hide
Under a vele, that wimpled was full low,
And over all a blacke stole she did throw:
As one that inly mournd, so was she sad,
And heavie sate upon her palfrey slow:
Seemed in heart some hidden care she had;
And by her in a line a milkwhite lambe she lad...'

Poppet held out her hand for a cigarette, and Boots gave her one, and Henry struck a match. It was done wordlessly, like a pantomime...

Robin's attention began to wander away again from the poem. She turned her head a little and looked at Denis Bayard. He had a nice profile, not so sharp as Ricky's — nice hands — a sort of careless grace. She studied him gravely, and wondered what he was like. There was something so exciting about people, about meeting them and getting to know them. It was an adventure, a fascinating adventure that never staled because it was never twice the same. This Denis Bayard, for instance. Ricky had met him at Meredith's office in New York, several months ago. 'A nice chap,' he had pronounced. And now he had been transferred here — at the present moment he was on a picnic with them, sitting next to her in the middle of an April wood. That was all she knew. But how old was he? Twenty-six — twenty-seven. That meant that there were twenty-seven years of mystery behind him. Think of all the people he must have been connected with, all the things he must have done — people she had never heard of, things she knew nothing whatever about! There was something tremendously stimulating in the idea! She wanted to ask him a lot of questions, greedily, like a child: questions about where he had lived, and what he thought of different things, and what he was going to do with himself — all sorts of questions. Sometimes she felt this way towards complete strangers. People in the park, people sitting opposite her in the street-car — who were they, where were they bound for? It was more than curiosity; it was a sense of being suddenly alert to multitudinous secrets, suddenly and dramatically aware of deep-flowing undercurrents of beauty and humor and pain.

It was a wonderful feeling! Somehow she never ceased to be impressed by the thought of those hidden things, close at hand, on every side of her — thousands upon thousands of things that she knew nothing whatever about.

Bayard, turning suddenly, caught her glance. He smiled at her, and she smiled back. Then she looked away. She felt a little shy of him now. That was apt to happen when she began to think about people whom she had just met, to wonder about them. She felt shy, and a trifle in awe of those mysterious years behind him...

The sun had gone down. The scarlet-and-gold flames were dying in the wood; there was a chill in the air, a hint of gathering mists through the trees.

Robin glanced up again, fleetingly. She liked his smile...

Ricky had closed the book several minutes ago, and they were all beginning to stir themselves in the twilight. They moved slowly, languidly — as if emerging from a trance.

'Nice smell!' somebody observed. 'Where's it coming from?'

'Me,' said Poppet. 'I'm heavily perfumed for the occasion.'

Boots got up, rubbing his legs and yawning; Henry began to pack things into the basket; Fido reappeared.

'Come along,' Ricky directed. He held out his hand to Robin.

She sat back on her heels, with several leaves caught in her hair. 'I don't want to go. Couldn't you let me stay behind?'

'Snakes,' Poppet suggested. 'Bugs. Tramps. Rise, my darling ——'

Fido, filthy but ecstatic, watched them move off towards the road. Then something dawned on him. His ears drooped, his eyes grew anxious. He didn't want to be taken away from this beautiful place.

Robin, turning, saw him standing alone at the edge of the hollow. She came back several yards and knelt down, clicking her fingers: 'Here, Fido — here, doggy!'

He gazed at her, small and ragged and forlorn.

'Don't you want to come?'

His eyes, fastened unswervingly on her face, held an interrogating look, half-hopeful.

'I'm sorry,' she said. She sounded grave and apologetic, as if she were speaking to a child.

His tail began to move.

'No ——' She shook her head.

He made a little whining sound, a pleading sound. She felt distressed by it. She didn't want to return him to that slummy street, and it seemed suddenly tragic to her that she should have to do so. Quite often small things like this seemed tragic to her...

She stood up again, and saw that Denis Bayard had come back, too.

'He doesn't seem particularly keen for home, does he?'

'It's such a beastly home,' she explained. 'I don't blame him ——'

He strode over to the hollow, picked the dog up, and brought him back to her. They stood there for a minute or two. The trees were growing shadowy about them; the voices of the others sounded through the hush, clear but distant.

Robin stroked Fido's ears, and comforted him: 'I'll bring you out with me again,' she promised.

'And will you bring me out again?' Bayard inquired.

'If you'd like to come ——'

'I should,' he said. 'Very much.'

She became conscious of how close together they were standing. She stepped back a little.

'Do you always wear leaves in your hair?'

She put her hand up, laughing.

'No!' he protested. 'Don't take them out. They look nice.'

'Do they?'

It was so dim now that she couldn't see much but the pale outline of his face — the darkness of his eyes, the quick flash of his teeth. Suddenly, and for no particular reason, she found herself wondering what sort of impression he had formed of her — if by any chance he had been thinking things about her as she had been thinking them about him a little while ago when Ricky was reading. Perhaps he had. She almost asked him if he had, but stopped herself in time. Of course not! People didn't blurt out questions like that. She was always forgetting ——

A motor-horn croaked into the stillness.

'Hey!' somebody shouted, 'where are you?'

She turned quickly. 'Coming, coming ——' she called, and began to run towards the road.

2

The Tavern faced the west side of the park. It had a rugged-looking doorway, accompanied, just within, by a stout doorman who had grown a beard at the request of the management and was garbed in an outfit somewhat reminiscent of the toggery of the Beefeaters in the Tower of London. It had a hostess who buzzed around in a peasant costume and pearl ear-rings, and a check-room attendant who boasted, among various other accoutrements, a helmet with a plume and a shining sword — a blunt sword, so that none of the guests should be accidentally damaged; and it had a battalion of waitresses in lemon-colored skirts, black velvet jackets (hot but picturesque) and linen caps rather Dutch in effect. The floor was flagstoned; the ceiling was crossed with great beams; the fireplace was full of ashes and very grimy to convey a pleasing, but erroneous, impression of age. There were primitive-looking dishes; there were innumerable candles, and a number of electric fans, more or less adequately camouflaged.

The whole place had an air of artful, and premature, antiquity.

'Such *atmosphere!*' people said. There were frequent allusions to Shakespeare, and Chaucer, and Dr. Johnson...

The Tavern was two and a half years old. It belonged to Miss Marcia Rolf, a young lady who possessed a private income, a certain social standing, and an inward urge to Do Something. Quite a number of her friends were Doing Something. They had shops, for instance — hat shops with mauve draperies and elegant little chairs; and they arranged balls for various charitable purposes, and arranged bazaars for still more charitable purposes; and they went in for social-service work — holding bewildered-looking babies in their arms while newspaper photographers, especially invited to be on hand, took pictures of them.

But Miss Marcia Rolf not only wanted to Do Something — she wanted to Do Something Unusual. She thought of the Tavern. She broached the subject to Mrs. Sabine Rolf who was her aunt and guardian. Mrs. Sabine Rolf wasn't quite sure about it: 'I'm not quite sure about it,' she said, speaking with pompous deliberation. But her niece was.

She put an advertisement in one of the evening papers stating that, on the first day of the following month, she would require the services of a person qualified to assist with the launching and subsequent management of a high-class restaurant.

And the next morning, before breakfast, Miss Robina Kipling was on the front doorstep.

She was hatless. She was full of enthusiasm. No, she had neither launched nor managed a restaurant before, but she would be willing, delighted in fact, to have a try at it. She had helped run a boarding-house once, quite a big boarding-house — so she knew something about marketing on a large scale, and planning menus, and all that sort of thing. Where had she last been employed? Well, she had been acting as chauffeuse to a couple of old ladies. They were touring the White Mountains. She had had a grand time, but the old ladies fired her because she came down the hills too fast for them. Timid, you know. And before that? She ticked off a number of different things: working for a woman who owned dog-kennels, helping a florist, ushering in the Opera House, looking after the studio of an architect, selling travel books from door to door, doing odds-and-ends for World Peace Organizations, and Youth Movements, and the Animal Rescue League — for one so young she seemed to possess an astonishingly varied past. And now she was loose again, ready for anything exciting that turned up. She had seen the advertisement in last night's paper. There was that, and a lady who wanted some one to accompany her three children to California. But there was the problem of getting back from California, so she had decided upon the restaurant. It sounded interesting! What sort of restaurant was it going to be?

Miss Marcia Rolf, looking a trifle bewildered in her apricot-colored negligee, sketched a few tentative plans.

Miss Robina Kipling was charmed. She was enchanted. She sat on the edge of a brocaded chair and gazed raptly into space. Within five minutes she had thought of the helmet and sword, the fireplace, the banners on the walls, and the peasant-hostess; within another five minutes she had thought of the doorman, and the English recipes — 'Bubble-and-squeak, and toad-in-the-hole, and plum-duff, and all that sort of thing,' she talked rapidly, enthusiastically. 'We'll have to rummage around for them — lots of them! And let's have funny-looking forks with wooden handles, and shields over the fireplace, and minstrels...' Some twenty minutes later she swept out of the house. She was never actually engaged; she simply took possession of the situation.

And in due time, and over the protests of Mrs. Sabine Rolf, who favored something discreet and strictly colonial, the Tavern was launched upon a surprised public.

Boots arrived first, accompanied by Daphne Daniels. They made their way to the long table near the fireplace, and sat down while a waitress lit the candles in front of them.

Daphne put a cigarette into a heliotrope holder. She was very pretty, with dark, curling lashes and a radiant, if vacuous, smile. Her clothes were admirable, and she wore them with the somewhat studied effectiveness of a mannequin; her remarks were fluently uninteresting, and her opinions were merely the burrs which she collected, without effort, from conversational bushes. Boots's attitude towards her was compounded of a sort of amiable contempt for her intellectual equipment, and an affectionate appreciation of her feminine graces. She was what Poppet called his Public Lady Love. Hilda Morris was his private one. He admired Hilda intensely. She wore flat-heeled shoes, and was very earnest. She went for long walks with him, and discussed Social Reforms, and the League of Nations, and Sex; she was beautifully honest and tremendously stimulating — but she wasn't the sort of person that one could very well take around to dances or theaters or restaurants. Her shoulder-straps were always showing, for instance, and her petticoat — and she was addicted to felt hats that suggested ranches and herds of cattle. One didn't mind these things in private, one could rise above them; but in public they were distinctly embarrassing. Daphne was different. Daphne, from a pictorial point of view, was beyond criticism. She moved well, and sat well, and she managed her legs with a sort of inspired elegance. She was brainless, of course — quite brainless; but she made a good show...

He began to read the menu.

Marcia Rolf passed them — in black velvet, with a fur on her arm and silver pendants in her ears.

'Hello, Daphne. Hello, Boots.'

They greeted her casually.

The room was filling up now. More candles were being lit on the tables and in the wall-sconces. There was a great deal of movement and color and sparkle — people coming in and going out, the bright helmet, the yellow skirts of the waitresses, the banners and shields...

Ricky and Denis Bayard arrived; Robin dashed out of the office, spoke to them for a moment, then dashed away again; Henry arrived; Poppet arrived.

'Hello, everybody! Hello, Denis! Hello, Marcia ——' She waved towards the next table. 'Aren't you eating with us?'

'Not to-night, my dear. Aunt Sabine's coming.'

Robin reëmerged from another door. She sat down, beaming at them all cheerfully. 'Isn't this fun! I love mobs!'

'Denis is properly impressed with the Tavern,' Ricky told her.

'Are you?' She leaned forward a little, her eyes very bright and very blue in the candlelight.

'It's astonishing,' he declared. 'I'm overwhelmed.'

Poppet said: 'Ah, but you should have been here when Mimsy was hostess. Those were the days! Fleets of gentlemen used to sail in and gape at her over their broth and fall violently in love with her over their Brussels sprouts. She's beautiful, you know' — she tilted her head back with an air of mock seductiveness — 'like me, eh, Boots?'

'Don't gabble,' Boots requested.

A waitress hurried across the aisle. She had three chins and a number of private troubles — ranging from mice in her bedroom to a husband who had strolled off one day and forgotten to turn up again. She grinned at the Kiplings; and they greeted her with a candid and cordial friendliness which Mrs. Rolf (who reverenced the principles of democracy, but practiced them with discretion) found distinctly objectionable.

'Hello, Alma,' they said; and wanted to know how her little girl was.

Alma moved about from one to the other, filling their glasses. Her little girl was getting along much better, thank you — although it was sort of dull for her, sitting alone there in the evenings.

'Gosh! I should think so.' Robin reached for a menu. The bracelet she was wearing gleamed suddenly under the light of the candles. She noticed it, and pulled it off her arm with a casual movement. 'Here,' she directed, 'give her this. Tell her it once belonged to Ali Baba, and then it got lost, and a little while ago it was discovered in a cave by an — an Ethiopian prince. Tell her he would have sent it to her himself, but he wasn't sure of the address.' She leaned forward again, and opened the menu. 'Well,' she said briskly, 'what do you want to eat?'

They were silent for a moment or two; then Poppet pushed her chair back abruptly.

'I don't want anything.'

The Kiplings looked up.

'Excited?' Ricky asked.

She nodded.

They became attentive, concerned. 'Try and have a little,' they urged. 'Soup — salad ——' It was as if they were saying: 'Buck up, Poppet! It's going to go off all right! You'll be splendid! We know you'll be splendid! We believe in you!'

'A glass of milk,' Boots suggested.

Very well, she would have a glass of milk. Thank you...

The hostess came swishing towards them. She was a large, vivacious, expensively corseted lady, who, one felt, would as soon have been discovered without her clothes as without her smile. Peters, she informed them in a sparkling voice, had just sent word that the sausage-rolls had almost Given Out. Such an amusing thing for sausage-rolls to do, her manner implied. And Wellington wished to see Miss Rolf or Miss Kipling or both. He was sitting in the office and no one could move him. 'In his Apron!' she appended, her teeth flashing. 'In his Apron and — ah — quite Voluble!'

Marcia Rolf came over from the next table. 'What is it?' she inquired; and then; 'What shall we do?'

Robin issued instructions with the air of a general: the sausage-rolls were to be knocked off the menu; pork-pies were to be brought out; Wellington — 'I'll attend to Wellington,' she said. 'Anybody got a cigar?'

They shook their heads.

'Oh, bother! They always have such a soothing effect on him.'

'Try the old chap behind you,' Poppet suggested. 'He looks the type.'

Robin whirled round quickly and poked the left shoulder of an elderly, very solid-looking gentleman. 'Please,' she said, 'if you happen to have an extra cigar, could I borrow it?'

'Cigar?' repeated the gentleman blankly.

'Yes, please — I'll get you another one to-morrow.'

He put his fork down and stared at her.

'If you don't mind' — her tone politely suggested haste — 'it's one of the cooks,' she explained, rather loosely. 'I want to calm him down.'

'Oh, I see,' said the gentleman — a brave but obvious lie. After another moment's hesitation, he produced a cigar and held it out to her with an air that was somewhat reminiscent of that of a small boy called upon to present his hat to a magician for some mysterious conjuring purpose.

'Thank you *so* much,' Robin beamed, and made a dash for the office.

'Well, I'll be damned!' Denis murmured.

Ricky laughed. 'You'll get used to her,' he remarked. 'She simply goes ahead from where most of us leave off ——'

There was a scraping of chairs at the next table. Mrs. Sabine Rolf had just arrived. She was seating herself. She was requesting that the candles be moved farther back, and that another electric fan be turned on.

Mrs. Rolf was a large-busted woman with *pince-nez* and sensible shoes — a Daughter of the American Revolution who spoke about that rather distant event with the didactic vehemence of an actual participator. 'At this point,' she would say in a proud voice, 'we routed the enemy.' And one would have a swift vision of her at Bunker Hill: stationed in the thick of the fight, brandishing her silver-topped umbrella and glaring through her *pince-nez* at a horde of alarmed red-coats...

Ricky watched her for a moment, then shifted his attention to Marcia. Her small hat closed darkly about the paleness of her face; the silver pendants swung against her neck, delicately, glintingly. He looked at her now with an admiration that was as tempered and dispassionate as that which might have been aroused by a vase. Two years ago it had been different. There had been glamour then — excitement — a leaping ecstasy; there had been poems sufficient to fill a small volume — though he had never had the courage to send them to her, thank the Lord! But, as always happened sooner or later, from one cause or another, the glamour had suddenly faded, the excitement and ecstasy had suddenly flickered out. He had forgotten why. A trivial enough reason, probably. She had laughed at the wrong time, perhaps — or hadn't laughed at the right time. Little things like that possessed a tremendous power; they revealed something and destroyed something; they accomplished their work ruthlessly and in an instant; and once it was done there was no recapturing that first concept, that first flare of emotion.

Marcia caught his glance, and smiled at him.

He nodded back. Two years ago he would have been thrown into a seventh heaven. But to-day —— He felt suddenly distressed, almost angry with himself. What right had he to demand perfection? Now that she had become interested in him, why couldn't he love her again? It oughtn't to be particularly difficult. She was beautiful; she was agreeable; she was fairly intelligent. But that was just it! He *knew* what she was like now. Before she had been something mysterious and shadowy and aloof...

Alma returned for their orders.

Robin emerged from the office, flushed but triumphant. As she passed his table, she gave the solid-looking gentleman a confidential nod: 'It worked!' she informed him brightly. 'He's meek as a lamb!'

'Well, well ——' said the gentleman in a vague voice.

Robin was going to walk to the theater with Poppet; and Henry was going to take the rest of them for a ride, to fill in time.

'Well, good luck!' Ricky said.

'And *do* remember your legs,' Boots urged. 'Don't wind them! And don't wriggle your eyebrows round too much. It looks idiotic! And if you *have* to blow your nose, you needn't make a noise like a bugle ——'

He was terribly anxious that Poppet should show up well beside Miss Irene Craven, the guest star.

Every time she marched through the doorway Robin felt the same little clutch of excitement in her throat. She was going in the back of a theater! She knew what the 'behind' was like now! She knew the people, and all about the props and the lights, and how the jewels were apt to come from Woolworth's, and the costumes were apt to pass through a variety of artful evolutions from play to play. Somehow it never ceased to seem a trifle miraculous that she *should* know these things! She could never help thinking how utterly flabbergasted she would have been ten years ago, say, at the idea of such familiarity with the stage and with the personages who moved across it...

A short, dim corridor; a telephone booth; several offices; the rehearsal-room, shadowy now, with a faint glimmer of piano keys at one end, and the prim outlines of chairs ranged against the plaster walls; the greenroom, with its dull lamplight and slack-cushioned rockers, with its bulky Sphinx — a relic of the 'Cæsar and Cleopatra' of a former season — towering grotesquely in an alcove. Then a downward flight of stairs. The warm, thick smell of grease-paint. A sputter of noises: the orchestra practicing somewhere overhead; Stewart Marsh at the sewing-machine in the wardrobe-room, nonchalantly putting the finishing touches to his carnival costume for the second act; Peg Wylie in a nervous tantrum as usual — 'Look at it! Look at the way it sags!' Tears streaming down her cheeks: 'They expect me to wear the most God-awful outfits ——'

Miss Randolph arriving: a quiet, drab old lady with white woolen stockings and canvas shoes, and a small cat, which she carried about in a closed basket and talked to in whispers when nobody was near enough to hear her. Miss Randolph had acted with Irving and Terry, and with half the other luminaries of the past; she had seen things, and overheard things, and taken part in things; she was full of pale, dead secrets that seemed no longer to matter. And after her, Thomas Ward — who had been playing juveniles for twelve years; and Ross, the stage-manager, who was equipped with an impressive repertoire of oaths in a variety of languages; and Mr. Edgette, an ingratiating comedian, who was the somewhat amused parent of a daughter who delivered passionate and powerful lectures on 'Esperanto — the Panacea for World Chaos,' and a son who, turning his histrionic talents to a different use, had become a minister of the gospel, a debonair shepherd of a fashionable flock...

'Hello!' Robin said. 'Hello, Miss Randolph! Hello, Tommy ——'

'Hello, there! How are you?'

'Out in front to-night, Robin?'

'Rather!'

'It'll split!' Peg prophesied in a wailing voice. 'The moment I sit down ——'

'Oh, for God's sake, Wylie ——'

A corridor lined with dressing-rooms:

Miss Irene Craven was occupying Number Two during her stay at the theater. She was already seated before the mirror — a large, picturesque-looking individual, with cold, intelligent eyes, and hair that was almost amber-colored, and so smooth that it appeared to be waxed back over her head into a permanent coil. Behind her, a woman with a cigarette in her mouth was leaning against the window-sill. She was short — squat-looking; with eyes that held an odd, cryptic expression.

Poppet paused in the doorway: 'Good-evening, Miss Craven. I'd like to introduce my sister ——'

Miss Craven glanced over her shoulder, and said 'How do you do.' Her voice was arresting; it was strong, it was curiously rough.

Robin felt the old thrill of excitement. 'How do you do,' she returned. There! She was speaking to a distinguished actress! Standing within half a dozen feet of a celebrity!

The woman by the window knocked her cigarette against the wall, then put it back in her mouth. No one took any notice of her.

'Well?' Poppet inquired, switching the lights on in Number Seven. 'Were you very impressed?'

Robin established herself on a dilapidated *chaise-longue*. 'She's gorgeous-looking!' she declared. 'She's sort of — like a goddess! Isn't her hair beautiful!'

'Mm. A work of art.'

'Do you suppose she'd come and see us, Poppet? We could have a party or something.'

'We could,' Poppet agreed, 'but I don't think we'd better.'

'Why?'

She pulled her dress off and threw it across a chair. 'Because something tells me that you wouldn't care for the lady.'

'You mean she's high-hat?'

'No — queer.'

'Queer?' Robin looked up, questioningly. A certain insinuating note in Poppet's voice informed her that this was one of those small, perfectly ordinary words which, for sophisticated initiates, were endowed with a peculiar significance. Queer? Her thoughts shaped themselves, involuntarily, intuitively. 'You mean ——'

'One of Nature's little whimsies.'

She said: 'Oh — I see,' and felt as if something had fallen down with a bang inside of her. She was startled and distressed. She wished she could stop being startled and distressed by such things; she wished she could regard them with casual distaste, as Poppet did — or with forthright disgust, as Boots did. But she couldn't seem to. Every time she came up against them there was the same feeling of intermingled compassion and revulsion — and astonishment.

Poppet, in a garishly flowered kimono, had begun to busy herself at the dressing-table. Her eye caught Robin's in the mirror. 'Cheer up!' she consoled. 'Think what a beautifully wholesome little damsel I am ——'

Pat started down the corridor: 'Half Hour! Half Hour!' He stopped at Number Seven. 'Hello, Robina! How are you?'

'Oh, fine. How's yourself?'

'I'm hungry,' he informed her in a sorrowful voice. 'I haven't eaten for three days. I haven't any money.'

'Where's it gone this time?'

He made a dramatic gesture. 'My widowed father and mother; my thirty-eight little brothers and sisters; my orphan goldfish ——'

'All right,' she grinned back at him — as usual. 'Give the password at the Tavern.'

He clasped his hands to his stomach. 'You're a noblehearted young woman!' he declared. 'You're a —— What the hell's Wylie bawling about now?' He was off again, banging doors, hurling out questions.

Poppet, her face smeared with grease so that it looked like a pallid, rather clownish mask, was staring intently into the mirror: red high on the cheeks, and on the lips; a line of blue under the eyes, a line of brown above and beyond them towards the temples; purple on the lids, blended delicately up to long, black, sloping brows; a red dot in the corner of each eye; red strokes in the nostrils...

Peg suddenly burst into the room. Her face was half made-up, and she was wearing a brassière, a pair of pink silk drawers and one stocking.

'Rand Tarvin's out in the hall!' she announced. 'He's talking to Clumington! I feel as if I'm going to be sick! I feel ——'

'What's he like?' the Kiplings demanded.

'I don't know — Pat saw him. I feel as if I'm going to ——'

Robin hurried down the corridor:

Across the hall, at the foot of the stairway leading to the stage, Henry Clumington was posed familiarly in a shower of light: hands clasped behind his back, noble head inclined to an attentive angle. It was the attitude in which he had been photographed and painted and sketched a hundred times; the attitude with which he had confronted prominent and bustled actresses of a former era — ladies with mighty hips and lofty brows and voices like organs. It was a suave and courtly attitude: the complacent posture of an elderly gentleman, still handsome, who had been especially favored by Providence with experiences and triumphs now unavailable to the rising generation of actors.

The past, to Miss Randolph, was a casket of faded flowers; to Henry Clumington it was a glittering and inimitable halo spinning about his head...

Robin, standing within the shadow of the corridor, gazed at Rand Tarvin's coat-tails. She wished he'd turn round.

He did, after a minute or two; and she had a brief glimpse of a rather long, rather thin face — a clever, sulky mouth; high cheek-bones; narrow eyes, under beautifully shaped brows which, at the moment, as if in response to something that Clumington had just said, he was quirking a little — quizzically, with a subtle eloquence. Then he turned towards the stairs again.

Pat reappeared, pounding doors and shouting: 'Fifteen Minutes!'

Robin hurried back to Number Seven:

'He's quite young,' she reported. 'And he's got nice hands — almost as nice as Ricky's. And he looks interesting. I hope we can meet him. Do you suppose he's going to be here very long?'

Poppet wasn't sure. Having finished beading her lashes, she threw her kimono off, slipped a geranium-colored dress over her head, and sat down again. She put her hand up to her heart: 'Thumping like hell!' she observed.

Robin's thoughts swerved abruptly from Rand Tarvin; her whole attention belonged to Poppet. She said: 'Buck up! Everything's going to be all right!'

They were silent for a moment or two.

Then Poppet leaned forward a little, gravely, with her arms clasped round her knees. 'Marsh and I've got a scene in the first act,' she said. 'Near the end. I want you to take special notice of it — and tell Ricky and Boots to.'

'Something funny?'

'Yes—on top. And sort of tragic underneath. That's the point. If I don't do it well, they'll laugh; if I do—they won't!'

'Oh, they won't, Poppet! Of course not!'

Another pause, and then:

'You're very sure of me, aren't you, Robin?'

'Yes,' she said. And she was — beautifully, unfalteringly sure!

Poppet's eyes met hers. 'Sometimes,' she said, 'not often, but just sometimes, I wonder if — you know, if I've really got anything in me. Anything important. I wonder if I'll peter out in a few years. Lots of people do. How do I know I shan't? Or I wonder if I'll go on and on, sort of — nibbling at success. Never doing anything that matters. Never getting anywhere in particular.' Her voice suddenly sharpened: 'Wouldn't that be hellish!' she said. To flunk outright, branded with defeat! Or to be driven to the smarting realization that the stuff you were made of was —mediocre! Mediocre! She hated the word! She declared, grimly: 'If I really thought I wasn't going to amount to anything, I'd — turn the gas on!' Then, with a capricious change of mood, she cheered up again: 'But I *am* going to, aren't I? Tell me I'm going to!'

Robin said: 'Of course you are, Poppet! Of course!'

And: 'Sure!' Poppet echoed. 'I'm a little budding Bernhardt; I'm a ——'

Pat's voice rang across hers, loud, peremptory:

'Places, every one! Places!'

There was a confused hubbub in the corridor.

Poppet turned quickly to the mirror, smoothing her hair, flattening her skirt over her slim hips. Robin jumped up. She opened the door and stood there, watching, waiting, her eyes like blue jewels. This was the beginning of something, and she loved beginnings: the air taut with expectancy, the bright shape of achievement looming ahead!

This was one of the beautiful moments — the vivid moments!

'Ready!' she said.

They stepped outside.

Every one was emerging from the dressing-rooms and moving, like a parade, towards the lighted stairway: Miss Irene Craven, with a vermilion-lined wrap over her shoulders and thin, glittering hoops swinging from her ears; Peg, gnawing her lips nervously; Mr. Edgette, whistling; Marsh, handsome, immaculate, utterly nonchalant; Tommy, lugging a suitcase and wearing a raccoon coat; Miss Randolph, with the old, indomitable light in her painted face...

'The house is sold out!' Pat announced.

And Poppet said 'Hurray!' and went prancing across the hall, her eyes brilliant, her heart beating like a drum under her geranium-colored dress.

Robin stood on the landing while they passed her: 'Good luck, everybody! Good luck!' Silly, inadequate little words; but she waved them briskly, flourished them like a flag. Then she hurried through the shadowy wings to the small door that led into the theater.

A glare of light; a sudden sputter of sounds — the orchestra, chattering, seats being pushed down, programs being rustled.

She could see Ricky and the others near the front. They had just come in, apparently. Boots was helping Daphne to take her coat off. Nichols, from 'The Observer,' was three or four rows behind them, polishing his spectacles. Jarrold was there. Good! There were two other openings to-night, and he had come to this...

People streaming down the aisles. Boxes filling up. A very impressive party arriving in one of them: wraps being thrown over the gilt chairs, powdered arms flashing against the faded draperies.

Morse, from 'The Evening Tribune.'

Ushers tearing about everywhere: 'Rise, please ——' Inspecting tickets, dealing out programs.

Four elderly ladies discovered in the wrong seats. Agitation. Confusion. Ploughing into the aisle again, with arms full of purses and gloves and opera glasses and chocolate boxes...

Mrs. McMasters was at the end of the fifth row, munching peppermints.

'Hello, Mrs. Mac ——'

'Hello. How's Poppet?'

'Oh, fine. You'll have supper with us afterwards, won't you?'

'If I'm hungry,' she agreed.

On down the aisle.

Mr. Schultz, the violinist, nodded to her; and she nodded back.

Mrs. Henry Clumington arrived, in a swirl of veils. Mrs. Clumington had a passion for veils; long, floating, pastel-colored ones. She moved casually, and they fluttered; she moved hurriedly, and they flapped; people were always tripping on them, doors were always being shut on them; and to shake hands with her without becoming embarrassingly involved in their streaming folds required both concentration and adroitness...

Rand Tarvin came in.

Robin pointed him out to the others; and Daphne, gazing at the wrong person, said: 'Oh! Isn't he a sweet-looking man!'

Then the orchestra stopped playing. The waves of chatter, after rising for a moment, began to go down. The lights turned, gradually, almost imperceptibly, from a glare to a glimmer. Then darkness.

The Kiplings leaned forward a little, tense, expectant.

The curtain rose.

Welcoming applause for Miss Craven — comments on her appearance needling their way surreptitiously through the shadowed house; Mr. Edgette wringing humor from a conventional butler; Peg missing a cue; Miss Randolph drawing back the curtains, peering into a painted garden; then, off-stage, Poppet's voice, calling out to somebody, laughing, coming nearer ——

The Kiplings' eyes flew to the door. They were rigidly attentive. For a moment nothing in the world mattered to them, nothing existed, but Poppet — Poppet strolling in from the garden, rather as she might have strolled into the living-room at home, except that she was separated from them now, not merely by the footlights, a tangible barrier, but by something else, something mysterious and subtle, so that it was as if, were they to confront her, she wouldn't recognize them, and were they to call out, she wouldn't hear. Then, as the faint note of nervousness in her voice was gradually controlled, they relaxed a little...

Clumington had come in. And now Marsh. Miss Randolph went out. Peg stumbled again, leaping ahead this time — so that there was one of those harrowing moments of uncertainty during which the sensitive members of the audience experienced an embarrassment only a trifle less acute than that of the actors. Then Marsh, improvising a few lines, led them quickly and adroitly on to firm ground.

The garden was becoming twilit; the painted trees were nothing but dark scrawls against the painted sky. Mr. Edgette moved about the room, lighting the lamps. He went out. Clumington went out. Marsh was left alone for a moment. Then Poppet came back ——

The woman behind Boots began to whisper, and he turned round and said 'Shut up!' in a fierce voice.

Robin felt her knees beginning to tremble. 'They mustn't laugh, Poppet! *Make* them not laugh!' There was a ripple of amusement through the house, and she wanted to say: 'Sh! Sh! You mustn't ——' There was silence again.

The scene went on:

Now Marsh was speaking. Now Poppet — now she was standing before the open door with the garden full of blue dusk behind her. Now she had gone, swiftly — leaving a sudden emptiness on the stage, as if a flame had been blown out, as if something vital and dynamic had been withdrawn.

There was a stir; a spatter of applause. Mrs. McMasters was banging her hands together noisily. Comments were being made...

But the Kiplings were motionless; they were too moved, too proud to speak. For Poppet had done it — Poppet had come through with flying colors!

Several minutes later, Robin, as she turned to get up, saw Rand Tarvin open and search his program for a name.

3

Boots, at the conclusion of his first year at college, had secured a summer position as chauffeur to Mrs. Sabine Rolf.

It was a fairly lucrative, if not particularly exciting, occupation, with injunctions to drive slowly, honk at all corners, and run over no cats on penalty of dismissal. Several times a week Mrs. Rolf was conveyed to the various clubs — awesome edifices with intellectual-looking doormen, and coats-of-arms a trifle blurred in design and significance — of which she was an influential member; and there were periodic and systematic tours of the surrounding countryside to make sure that Nature, towards whom her attitude was rather that of a benevolent patroness, was doing, punctually and competently, what it was supposed to do.

'Ah,' Mrs. Rolf would remark, peering through the polished windows of her opulent limousine, 'the apple trees have done very nicely this year.' And one would have a feeling that she was patting them graciously on the head, and that the apple trees were curtsying back and saying: 'Thank you, Mrs. Rolf.'

To Boots, his employer seemed a singularly unpleasant and unadmirable woman. She lived on an inherited fortune, to begin with; and he strongly disapproved of fortunes — especially inherited ones. And there was her rabid patriotism — her militaristic tendencies. She was always giving utterance to sentiments which, when stripped of their verbal trappings, meant, briefly: Wars are shocking, and I trust we shall never have another, but we must make quite certain that we shall be in a position to win the next one. And she was a snob: she was armed with the invulnerable complacency of one who was confident that, in due time, and not so much owing to spiritual grace as to family connections, she would move in the best circles in heaven as she was now doing on earth...

In engaging Boots she realized that she was rendering him a peculiar service. Now he would be brought, if only indirectly, in contact with the culture, dignity, and decorum which the Kipling *ménage* so obviously lacked. He would have an opportunity to observe things, to emulate things. And she, appreciating his position, would be pleased to help him. Sincerely pleased! She would, for instance, to begin with, question the propriety of his consorting with colored chauffeurs while waiting for her outside the clubs.

Boots was distinctly upset by this. He informed her, haughtily, that one of his best, firmest, most accomplished and most admirable friends was colored. And on the following day, to add proof to assertion, he made a point of inviting Carlin Matthews to have dinner with him at the Tavern. They sat directly across the aisle from Mrs. Rolf, who was entertaining a small party of which the most conspicuous member was a Brigadier-General whose mustache got thoroughly drenched in his tomato soup. Boots said good-evening to her; he said good-evening to her twice, because she didn't appear to hear him the first time. There was, afterwards, a somewhat stormy ten minutes for certain people; and Robin arrived home bearing, for the perpetrator of the offense, several messages of a highly objurgatory nature...

Boots was indignant. He was furious. 'It's an insult!' he shouted. 'It's a damned insult ——'

He eulogized Mr. Carlin Matthews at the top of his lungs; he denounced Mrs. Sabine Rolf; he compared them carefully — their hearts, their minds, their souls; and he concluded with a brief but dashing statement in which the little finger of one was valued above the entire person of the other.

To pacify him, the not unsympathetic Kiplings suggested entertaining his colored friend in the privacy of their own apartment.

Boots said, 'Yes! I will!' very loudly and violently, as if he were disagreeing with them. And the next day he issued invitations for the following Sunday evening, to Mr. Matthews — and to two Japanese gentlemen and a Russian Jew, and, of course, Hilda Morris, who embraced this opportunity for demonstrating the equality of all men with open arms.

Before the guests arrived, Boots bombarded the family with a long, fierce, slightly nervous speech — the gist of which was that, were he to detect the faintest hint of condescension in their voices, their manner, their thought even, he would knock their heads off!

'But of course we'll be nice to them,' Robin protested.

And 'You'd better!' he said, quite savagely.

The two Japanese gentlemen arrived first, wreathed in smiles. They bore a large box of crystallized fruit; and were very pleasant and courteous and grateful for being asked. Then Hilda arrived, with her cowboy hat, and her massive shoes, and her shoulder-straps, a sort of mushroom color, very much in evidence as usual. And after her, Mr. Moskowitz — with dirty finger-nails and beautiful, mournful eyes; and lastly, Carlin Matthews: a quiet, intelligent-looking, well-groomed young man, who bowed when he was introduced to the others, but didn't offer to shake hands with them...

'Well,' Boots said in a cheerful voice, 'let's sit down.'

So they all sat down, and found themselves in a close circle — the chairs having been arranged beforehand to give an unescapable effect of unity. Every one was somewhat embarrassed, and very polite. Boots kept darting suspicious glances at the rest of the Kiplings to make sure that they were exhibiting a spirit of flawless friendliness; and the Japanese gentlemen kept smiling radiantly; and Mr. Moskowitz kept staring at his feet; and Mr. Matthews didn't utter a word, and looked as if he never intended to. Hilda, talking earnestly about prejudices, said: 'I believe we've got to *wake up*, don't you? When we all *wake up* ——' And Robin said: 'Do you expect to go back to China some time?' and then remembered that it wasn't China...

Boots began to look distinctly harassed.

The conversation, such as it was, struggled along — staggered feebly — then stopped. It didn't pause; it stopped. There was no mistaking the fact. A stark, aggressive silence dominated the room. Everybody carefully avoided everybody else's eyes; everybody experienced the same desperate desire to get up and run...

Boots turned to Ricky. His face was red, tragic, imploring. 'Would you?' he asked. 'Would you mind—awfully——'

And Ricky, with a grace of heart that the Kiplings appreciated to the very core of their beings, went over to the desk, pulled some papers out of one of the compartments, and, sitting down again in the absurd circle, read aloud to the company several of his latest poems...

When he had finished there was gusty applause from every one except the Japanese gentlemen, who beamed brilliantly and bobbed their heads this way and that with vivacious approval.

Mr. Matthews said: 'Oh, they're fine!'

And Robin, smiling at him, said: 'Yes, *aren't* they!' Then, in a confidential tone: 'His first book's coming out in the fall, you know ——'

And Boots, perspiring with relief, explained that he, Mr. Matthews, also wrote poetry.

'You do?' Ricky looked up, interested.

And they all began to clamor for samples: 'Please, Mr. Matthews ——'

He said, mumblingly, that he didn't have any with him.

But he could remember something, they declared, of course he could! They were insistent; they were relentless.

After a moment or two he gave in. He recited a few lines, his voice hurried, and so soft that the words were almost inaudible.

Ricky was charmed. 'Go on!' he urged.

And, 'Some more — some more!' the others demanded in a chorus.

Mr. Matthews went on for several minutes, his voice rising a little, growing fuller, richer, more eloquent...

When he stopped again, everybody was frankly enthusiastic.

'Haven't you ever sent any of them out?'

'Oh, no ——' He just did them for himself; they weren't good enough — he realized that they ——

Ricky leaned forward and said: 'Look here! If you'll give me some copies of those I'll take them round to Birchman. He's the editor of "The Review." I believe he'd be interested.'

Boots pounced with alacrity on the offer: 'Say! that'd be swell! Birchman,' he explained to Mr. Matthews, 'is a terribly influential guy. He discovers people. He discovered Ricky ——' While the others were talking he gazed upon his friend with great earnestness. Young Negro Poet Captures the Attention of the Literary World! Excellent! Splendid! Another smack in the face for Mrs. Rolf and her ilk...

Later on — after punch and sandwiches; and after Mr. Moskowitz had told them about the symphony he was planning; and Poppet, wearing an enormous feathered hat, had given her Impression of a Dowager at an Art Exhibit — the guests took their leave.

Boots, having gone with them to the front door (Hilda never permitted any one to escort her home), came up the stairs again. He seated himself on the sofa, surrounded by empty glasses and plates and rumpled napkins. He looked flushed and triumphant. He said, several times: 'It *did* go off well, didn't it!' His eyes were beaming; his thoughts were already forging ahead towards new things — greater things. 'Listen!' he said. 'Carlin's got a couple of sisters. We could have them next time. And Yamanaki's got a cousin who looks after all the Japanese stuff at the museum. He's tremendously interesting! And Hilda knows ——' He enumerated some of the impressive people whom Hilda knew: an Armenian who had seen his entire family shot down before him in cold blood; a Sicilian who was being relentlessly pursued by the Mafia; a woman who lectured on birth control, and had been to prison quite frequently, and was a personal friend of Havelock Ellis's...

'Look here!' Boots said, with mounting enthusiasm, 'we could have them round every Sunday evening! We could have a sort of open forum! All kinds of people — different nationalities ——'

Even after the others had gone to bed, he still went on sitting there, surrounded by empty glasses and plates and rumpled napkins...

4

Poppet, at the close of the season, left for a small fishing town on the north shore to act in the experimental theater that Rand Tarvin was conducting there. Her letters home — she wrote as regularly, if not as legibly, as Mimsy did — were full of enthusiastic and misspelled descriptions of her surroundings and activities. She was charmed with everything: the sea was grand; the people were fascinating; the theater itself, an old shack on the end of a decrepit wharf, was picturesque but probably perilous, since the wharf would no doubt collapse quite suddenly one day — and she would be found floating on the waves, looking somewhat startled, with weeds in her hair. And she was developing a terrific passion for oysters. And she was getting along famously in the plays, which, so far, seemed to have been set almost exclusively in brothels or hell. And she was lodged in a sloping-roofed attic above a popular grocery-store, with a window view that embraced suns coming up and moons going down, and gulls, and ships, and hordes of embryonic artists in gaudy smocks...

It sounded interesting; so one week-end, in midsummer, Robin and Ricky and Denis decided to have a look at it for themselves.

Denis, to simplify arrangements for an early start, had spent the night with the Kiplings. They got up long before sunrise. It was pitch-black outside, and hushed, with a damp coolness on the air. Robin made coffee, wearing Boots's leather jacket over her thin dress and a red scarf tied gypsy-fashion round her head; and they ate standing up at the table, yawning every few moments, and feeling pleasantly topsy-turvy at having breakfast like this, with the stars still out and the lamps still burning in the street. Then Ricky went off to the garage; and Denis packed a valise with bathing-suits and pajamas and toothbrushes; and Robin wrote a note of final instructions for Boots, who was snoring tranquilly in his room. After she had propped this against the coffee-pot, they switched the lights off in the apartment and made their way quietly through the halls and down the stairs; then out on to the pavement...

Ricky drove very swiftly. The air felt extraordinarily soft against their faces, as smooth as silk; the shadows parted before them, and closed in afterwards like dark, sucking waves. It had rained in the night: the streets were all cool and wet; there was a fine mist in the park, out of which the dripping trees loomed large and fantastic, their leaves gleaming here and there — where an occasional lamp lit them — like a jumble of metal flakes, polished, black-green, and motionless. For a minute or two, as they sped past the iron railings, the thin, clean smell of wet asphalt was struck across by the richer smell of drenched grass, and of soaked earth underneath the grass. Then this was gone.

Now the buildings were becoming taller: they were great slabs of blackness, powerful, arrogant, blundering into the stars. Now the bridge was ahead of them, with the river lying hazy and hushed between huge cliffs of brick.

They shot across it — so rapidly that the chain of lights on either side of them merged into two long, yellow streaks, and the air flew past them, not with the harsh vigor of a wind, but evenly, loosely, filling their eyes and their mouths, and flattening back their hair as flowing water might have done. Now the bridge was behind, and the buildings were shrinking again. Milkcarts moved in and out of the shadowy side streets, their bottles rattling, the horses' hoofs clicking on the pavement; a truck lumbered past; one or two phantom-like figures appeared, and disappeared...

The stars were losing their sharp brilliance; they were growing pallid, and the sky at the back of them was growing paler and paler. Soon the lamps were switched off. Everything was dim, lusterless, inert...

Now they had left the city. Fields rolled out on either side. They were wet and glistening; and again there was the rich smell of drenched grass, and of soaked earth underneath the grass. Trees towered up, standing alone, or forming cinereous clumps; there was a pond, with a fine white haze spread across it, like loosely wreathed smoke; then a farmhouse, and more fields enclosed in stone walls that were still darkened with the night's rain...

Now the road was curving in front of them. They had come to the hills; smooth, treeless, dimly green hills.

When they reached the top of the first one, Ricky swung the car round a little and stopped. It was breathlessly still. Behind and below them lay the city: ash-colored, a gigantic huddle of blurred shapes, with an opalescent sky rising up about it. They sat there, watching — like gods on a hilltop waiting for an ancient ritual. And suddenly, before them, the sky was in flames. Bright ribbons of fire flared across it, merging, separating, scorching the whole east...

And in a moment or two the city itself was charged with beauty. It took on a lovely luminousness, a delicate transplendency: all its windows were the color of rubies; all its domes and spires, even the smokestacks in the north, were carved from amber, were flashing and gleaming against the magnificent sky...

Robin was motionless. Sitting between Ricky and Denis, she stared downward, her hands clasped tightly in her lap. How extraordinary this was! How *dramatic!* And she had never seen it before, never seen the sun flame up over the edge of a city. Crimson and gold in the sky: bright banners of crimson and gold, leaping, deepening; and, underneath them — oh, splendid city! It might have been Camelot! Camelot, with a king riding through its streets, and plumed knights — Lancelot — Geraint — and lovely ladies leaning from the windows of its amber towers! And she had never seen it before! Morning after morning, while she was sleeping, this tremendous thing had been happening; morning after morning Beauty had seized the city, and possessed it utterly for a magic moment!

She thought: 'I will remember how it looks! I will always remember!'

And it was as if she were spreading out her arms and gathering up all the loveliness of that instant — the bright sky, the little hills curving about them, the smell of wet grass, the city like a jewel, with the mists beyond — gathering it all up, softly, secretly, and storing it within herself.

Ricky, starting the car again, swung it round with an abrupt movement.

'Just in time,' he observed. 'In another moment it would have been — ordinary.'

They raced downhill, with a thin, silverish light polishing the deserted road, flowing sleekly across the grass, filling the trees.

'Ordinary!' Robin repeated, after a while. 'It's a depressing little word. It's like rice-pudding, and cotton stockings ——'

Denis flung one arm across the back of the seat. He said: 'Oh, I don't know. It's got its good points. Look at me, for instance.'

She did look at him, sideways, with her hair blowing against her cheeks.

'My smile,' he conceded, 'is, as you've doubtless noticed, exceptionally charming — but apart from that I'm quite ordinary.'

'Are you?' She regarded him with grave interest. 'No — I don't think you are.'

'But I am! Aren't I, Ricky?'

'Sure,' Ricky agreed. And meant it. As a matter of fact, he sometimes envied Denis his ordinaryness. Or was ordinaryness the right word? Anyhow — he envied him, at times, his casual acceptance of life, his air of being so comfortably *en rapport* with the world about him. Wherever Denis was, with whatever people, he seemed to *fit*. He possessed a flair for invariably enjoying the popular thing at the proper moment. He was always to be found looking at the right paintings — listening to the right music. It was impossible to think of him reading a book which every one else had read, and finished discussing, six months ago. He wore the latest opinions and theories as gracefully as he wore the latest clothes; and he appeared to do so, not haphazardly, or sheeplike, but from preference — as if he had investigated all other opinions and theories and had found that the most fashionable were also, indisputably, the best.

This propensity, apart from its social advantages, must, Ricky felt, be decidedly comforting to the heart. Everybody holding hands, and chanting together! Bolstering one another up! Safe — clubbable!

Well, why not? Sometimes one grew tired of trudging off alone.

He liked Denis. He liked him, probably, as much as any one else he knew.

So did Robin. She thought, 'Of course you're not ordinary!' and tipped her head back so that the air flew against her throat, and half-closed her eyes so that, through narrow slits, she saw the world as nothing but a formless flashing of silver and green.

As a matter of fact, people whom she knew — friends, even acquaintances — never did seem ordinary to her. As soon as they entered into her life they became imbued with a bright significance. They were absorbing — important. Denis, for instance. Denis, perhaps, especially. He was very amusing. He was very charming — the way he talked, with a sort of casual crispness, his smile, his kindness and courtesy. And he was going to do something: he was going to write a book! He had told her about it only a short while ago, and she had been tremendously interested. He had been meaning, he said, to get down to it for several years; but other things —— Oh, yes! she knew. Other Things *were* a bore! But now, quite soon, he intended to begin work on it. In the fall, probably. He had the title all ready: *Perilous Quest*. It was going to be, not exactly autobiographical, but somewhat about himself — his own experiences. He had the whole thing thoroughly planned. It merely needed to be written.

She had said: 'Oh, I think that's fine, Denis! Do start soon ——'

They were racing down towards the sea now. Already there was a tang in the air. Above the sharp green of the trees the sky was flawless, a pure, fresh blue with a flying pattern of birds far away...

She could feel, behind her shoulders, Denis's arm stretched lazily across the back of the seat. And, feeling it, she was suddenly and quite overwhelmingly glad that he had been able to come along with them. Yesterday, when he had thought for an hour or two that he couldn't manage it, it had seemed as if all the brightness had gone out of their plans. She had been surprised, and somewhat irritated, at the acuteness of her disappointment. Why should she feel like this? Regret would have been reasonable enough; but not this — this sharp, almost tragic sense of frustration. Why should the fact that Denis Bayard couldn't come with them make so enormous a difference? There would be Poppet — Ricky —— The Kiplings had always been so sufficient unto themselves that she strongly resented this unexpected show of dependence upon an outsider. It was stupid — wrong! One's friends ought not to be able to sway one's moods, control one's happiness. She had felt, instinctively, that it was *dangerous*.

Then something-or-other had happened: 'I can come,' he had called through the telephone. And she had shouted back: 'Hurray!' and felt exhilarated and jubilant, as if his decision were of the most terrific importance...

It was mid-morning, and the heat was pressed thick and golden on the marshes when they came in sight of the town. There were old streets to pass through first, narrow, cobbled, with prim old houses looking as uninhabited as the painted houses in a vaudeville backdrop. Then dignity dwindled down gradually into decrepitude; and after a while, as they neared the Point, decrepitude suddenly flared out into color, and audacity, and a lackadaisical sort of grace.

A brisk wind, and a hot, brilliant sweep of sunshine; a brilliant sea, the color of robins' eggs and ridged with the flashing silver of foam; a sprawled-out collection of wooden buildings, painted with bright blues and oranges and yellows; scarred and wobbly wharves crouching across the water; a clutter of boats near the shore, and, farther out, limned as delicately as moth-wings against the sky, several lovely sails full of whiteness and wind.

The intersecting lanes were narrow, and there seemed to be a great many people strolling through them. All sorts of people: girls wearing vivid blue trousers, and white shirts, and three-cornered scarfs; and men with easels under their arms; and a number of older women, affectedly bizarre, with cigarettes drooping from their mouths, and no stockings, and long, dangling ear-rings...

A sight-seeing bus lumbered past.

A hand-organ was being played somewhere, raucously, mournfully.

A man was selling bananas at a corner. His cart was mounded with the fruit, sleek-skinned, rich yellow in the sunshine. And farther along another man was bawling out: 'Balloons — balloons!' with a great cluster of them floating over his head, bobbing in the wind, purple, crimson, emerald: bright bubbles against the sky...

'Faggot Road,' Denis discovered. 'There it is! Quick—'

And Ricky swung the car round on two wheels, honking violently. And Robin dealt out Poppet's directions: 'Past the post-office. Where's the post-office? Hey, mister, where's —— Oh, there it is! And the next turning to the left—to the *left*, idiot! And five doors down. One, two ——'

And then Poppet herself was beside them, was springing on to the running-board: tanned, beaming, vivacious.

'*Robin! — Ricky! —*' She fell on their necks and embraced them with great ardor; while the car, more or less left to its own resources, lunged forward and almost crashed into a group of budding geniuses.

'Help! Help!' roared a young gentleman in a lavender shirt.

And Poppet waved to him cheerily, and shouted: 'It's my family arriving! Here we are! Whoa, Ricky ——'

And, with a jerk and a shriek of brakes, they drew up in front of the grocery-store — a large, ramshackle building with an interior that was strewn carelessly with food and hazed with cigarette smoke.

'Robin's with me,' Poppet informed them gustily, 'and you two're over there, at Bren's — the shack with the red door —— Gosh! but it's grand to see you again! Aren't you glad to see me! Don't I look nice! I hope the room'll be all right. Isn't this a swell place? Didn't I *tell* you! Come on, Robin —— Hey, you two, put your bathing-suits on and hurry over here when you're ready. Come on, Robin ——' She gripped Robin's arm and piloted her through the store, up a steep stairway in the rear, and into a small room full of wind and sunshine, overlooking the sea and the white sails and the old wharves black as thunder against the radiant blue.

'There!' she concluded. '*There!*'

And Robin hung herself perilously out of the window and sniffed, long ecstatic sniffs, and wanted to know what this was and what that was, and when she could go swimming and if she could go sailing ——

'Oh, you can do anything here,' Poppet declared lavishly.

And a little later Rand Tarvin strolled in, chatted to them for a moment or two, and then strolled out again, picking up a pipe from the bureau as he passed.

Poppet had made plans for a picnic lunch. She explained: 'There are such avalanches of people around here, and I want to keep you to myself for a little while.' So, wearing bathing-suits and carrying a basket of sandwiches, they went off to the Point.

It was deserted there. The wind was very much brisker. There were great jagged rocks, like troubled waves held spellbound, stricken into stillness and silence. The sea slid about them with a guttural, slobbering noise; the hot sun splintered against them. There was a path among the boulders, and they followed it, up and up, until they came to a high, green level. Down below them the sea was a blue blaze: the sound of it was in the wind, the smell of it in the air. Above them bright clouds were flocking across the sky.

They threw themselves on the grass.

'This,' Poppet declared, 'is the most beautiful place in the world.' She sat back on her heels, and gazed at them: 'Now, then, tell me everything! What've you been doing with yourselves? How are you, Ricky? How are you, Denis?'

'I'm very well, thank you,' Denis said politely. 'Since we last met I've had my hair cut, and — let me see, I believe I've got two new ties.'

'Pooh! that's nothing. I've got a new skin. I peeled, and peeled. It was fascinating! And how's my little Boots? Started any more Societies for World Peace?'

'He's got interested in the Zionist Movement,' Robin reported. 'I don't know what started him, but he's carrying on a hectic correspondence with rabbis and all sorts of people. Offering them his services, you know. His mail's simply *immense!* He wants all the successful Jewish business men in America to go back to Palestine and become shepherds.'

'Good gracious! How quaint! And what about Mimsy?'

'Oh, damn! I forgot to bring it — we had a letter from her yesterday. She's in Venice now! *Venice!*'

'Mm! Lucky dog!'

'They're staying in a palace — with a canal right outside, and no bathrooms, and gondolas! Honest-to-goodness gondolas — I always think of them as sort of — you know — mythical, like dragons. Don't you? And they're going around a lot, and meeting all kinds of swanky people ——'

'I expect she'll marry one of them! I expect she'll marry a duke, and we'll have a little swarm of semi-royal nephews and nieces.'

'Possibly,' Ricky said. 'But there's something else threatening us. The Widderness's nephew.'

'Horrors! Have they got a nephew?'

'He's just appeared on the horizon,' Robin explained. 'He's in Paris, apparently, and he's going to join them later on, and they're all coming home together.'

Poppet made a grimace. 'Imagine having the Widdernesses for in-laws! *What* a lark! We'd probably be invited in the back-entrance once a month to say hello to Mimsy. "Hello, dear Mimsy," we'd say in timid voices. "This is us. My! *don't* your new diamonds look grand!" And then we'd have glasses of milk and jam sandwiches in the kitchen; and then four butlers in plush suits would march in and give each of us fifty cents to buy something nice with; and then we'd be shown out. I can see it all quite plainly.'

Denis, narrowing his eyes against the brilliant sun, said: 'Please, who *are* these Widdernesses? I'm burning with curiosity.'

'They're a Lady and a Gentleman,' Poppet told him. 'We met them at the Rolfs'. They're rather depressing. The biggest thing against them, of course, is that they don't like me. When people don't like me — right off, by instinct — I always feel that there must be something fundamentally the matter with them.'

He grinned back. 'Oh, without a doubt! But they like Mimsy?'

'Rather! They're smitten with her. They've — Taken Her Up!'

'And does she enjoy being taken up?'

'Well — she seems to.'

It was a tender subject with the Kiplings. They could never quite reconcile themselves to the fact that Mimsy *did* seem to enjoy it. Several months ago, when the Widdernesses had first displayed an interest in her, they had been rather pleased; then, as the interest had assumed monopolizing proportions, and they had found that she was becoming more and more absorbed in a circle from which they themselves were practically excluded, they began to feel piqued, resentful, troubled. And Mimsy herself, sensitively conscious of their reactions, was also troubled. Standing before them, with a mauve-and-gold wrap over her cream dress, and her pale hair bound sleekly about her head, she would have a sudden sense of inquietude, almost of guilt. 'Oh, I do wish they would ask you, too — I feel such a *hog* ——' And: 'Don't be silly,' they would retort. 'Run along and enjoy yourself. We don't want to go ——' when, as a matter of fact, they would have liked very much to go — to the opera, to the dinner for the celebrated poet — but to go independently, as themselves, not as the Widdernesses' new hobby. They couldn't help feeling that, even if she wasn't aware of it, there was something humiliating in Mimsy's position. It seemed to them that in return for value received, and to ensure the continuance of their favors, she was under a constant obligation to make herself agreeable to the Widdernesses; not to toady to them precisely — they balked at employing quite so harsh a word — but at any rate never seriously to run counter to their prejudices and standards; even, perhaps, to pander to their firm conception of herself as a fine flower springing miraculously from a family of weeds.

Then came the European tour; and the Kiplings, pocketing their convictions for once, were tremendously excited. Robin deserted the Tavern, Ricky excused himself from the office, Boots cut a class and Poppet cut part of a rehearsal; and they all went down to the docks to see the boat off. When the fog-horn blared out, Mimsy kissed each of them, quite fiercely, with tears in her eyes: 'Oh, I do wish you were coming, too — if *only* you were coming!' The Widdernesses, very calm and competent, shook hands with them. And Robin said: 'Oh, you will take care of her, won't you? She's never been away from us before ——' And Mrs. Widderness said, 'Of course, my dear,' slightly reproving, as if to remind them that now, for the first time in her life, Mimsy was going to be properly taken care of. And Mimsy said: 'You mustn't worry about me! You won't, will you? I'll be perfectly all right. They're so good to me ——' And, for a moment, the gratitude that she felt was like a bright light in her face; so that the Kiplings were suddenly stabbed with remorse for their censorious thoughts. They *were* being good to her! And it was quite natural — Mimsy was so beautiful and sweet and gracious. They were glad that the Widdernesses loved her; glad that they were opening up new worlds to her like this.

'Good-bye — good-bye ——' Mimsy leaned across the rail, her eyes wet, her eyes full of love for them.

'Good-bye — good-bye ——' They stood there in the rain, waving and waving, until the boat was lost in mists...

In the early afternoon a number of other people came down to the Point. They all went in swimming together; and Denis dived off the rocks into the deep water, beautifully, straight as an arrow; and Rand Tarvin pretended nearly to drown, so that Poppet, with much gasping and splashing, could demonstrate her ability as a life-saver.

'*There!*' she panted, having at last lugged and clawed him to the shore. 'How's that?'

'Painful!' he pronounced. 'Distinctly painful!'

'But I rescued you ——'

'Granted! But another time, if you don't mind, I should prefer to sink peacefully to the bottom.'

He smiled at her.

And she smiled back — quickly.

And Robin, watching them, was quite impressed by the fact that Poppet, obviously, was on the best of terms with Rand Tarvin. The distinguished Rand Tarvin, of whom she herself was still somewhat in awe...

Later in the afternoon they were taken for a launch ride. The sea was dazzling. It was rough, with white ridges of foam, and flocks of gulls flashing down towards it and veering up again. They sat on the hot roof of the cabin, dangling their legs. The wind stung them; the spray leaped sharply into their faces. Some one began to sing; and suddenly they were all singing, at the top of their lungs: singing, and pitching about, and roaring like mad across the blue glitter of the waves...

Afterwards they had dinner at a small tea-house near one of the wharves. It was very crowded. Everybody seemed to know everybody else. There was a blare of chatter, undertoned by the sound of dishes, and the sound of the sea outside.

Poppet, in high spirits, and wearing gaudy-looking chintz trousers over her bathing-suit, took possession of a center table. She proceeded to hail friends in all directions:

'Hey! — Margot — Dick — here they are! Come and meet them! Scotty, come over here and meet my family! This is my sister — this is my brother —— I say, Bill — *Bill Hackett* — want to guzzle with us? All right, bring another chair. A *chair* —— Hello, Mac! This is my sister. This is Mac, Robin. He seduces me in our next play — the filthy villain! Sit down, old dear. Sure there is! Shove up, everybody. More forks, Smitty — more forks ——'

Other people, farther off, she pointed out to them and expatiated upon with relish: 'See the man with the dimples? That's Tod Hammond. He writes short stories — all about sadists, and thwarted women, and what-not. And the girl in front of him's Mary Graham. She's a dancer — studied under Isadora when she was an infant, and married a broken-down count with a swell pedigree and a chin like a landslide. And that's Bren — the blonde. Isn't she sumptuous! Look at her eyelashes! She carves things out of soap — horses, and crucifixes ——'

The woman who ran the tea-house slouched over and sat on the edge of their table. She dropped cigarette ashes into their iced drinks, and said: 'My God, what lousy-looking salads. Why don't you get something else? ——' Then she slouched off again.

Ricky was looking across the room. 'Who's that?' he asked. 'To your left. The girl in green.'

'Where? Oh — Muriel something-or-other. Hello, Van! Want to eat with us? Sure there is! Shove up, every one. Another fork, Smitty. What've you been doing with yourself? You look depressed.

'I am! I've been taking care of Peg's cousin all afternoon.'

'Really? Have a pickle. What's she like — difficult?'

'Difficult! She's *agonizing!* She reads Browning!'

'Browning ——' somebody repeated vaguely.

'You know — "God's in His Heaven, all's right with the world."'

'Oh, yes. Quaint guy.'

A debonair-looking individual approached. He had a small beard, and dark, ardent eyes. He was skillfully attentive to Poppet. He said: 'Good-evening, charming one' — and leaned forward a little, resting his hand on her chair, tapping his long fingers against her shoulder.

Poppet cut curtly through his gallantries: 'How's Elsa?' she snapped.

He said: 'Oh — fairly well, thanks' — and stood up again. In a few minutes he strolled off.

Ricky quirked his eyebrows. 'Why so crushing?' he inquired.

Poppet took another roll. 'The girl he's living with isn't along with him this evening because she's unfortunately expecting a baby.'

'Well?'

'Well, under the circumstances' — she broke the roll — 'I think he's a particularly dirty kind of cad to come chasing around me.'

Mr. Bill Hackett, with his mouth full, said: 'You've got such a marvelous sense of honor, Polly ——'

'Oh, shut up,' she requested, 'and pass the butter.'

Mr. Bill Hackett was one of those literary youths who appear to combine extreme sophistication with the general vocabulary of a high-school girl. 'Ah, *ravishing!*' he shouted, from time to time, and, 'How utterly *gorgeous!* —' and now and then he clapped his hands together in an excess of enthusiasm, and let out gusts of firm and terrific laughter...

When he had disposed of his dinner, he concentrated his attention on Robin. He deluged her with showers of intimate information concerning himself; he quoted to her, at great length, extraordinary groups of words, the arrangement of which was apparently his chief occupation in life, and the meaning of which was doubtless an impenetrable mystery to all but himself.

'There!' he concluded at last. 'And now' — with a sort of sprightly graciousness — 'what about you? What do you do? Sing — sculp — write ——'

'I help manage a restaurant,' Robin said.

'A —? Oh, really!' He looked blank. The sprightly graciousness evaporated. He would, of course, have experienced the same abrupt slackening of interest if she had announced that she was president of an international banking concern. Mr. Bill Hackett had a fine contempt for anything that smacked of Business...

He swerved his attention to two ladies, with peeling noses and of indeterminate ages, who gave music-and-poetry recitals. They sat behind screens, Poppet had explained; and sometimes they read and played simultaneously; and sometimes one of them read, and then the other butted in and started playing; and sometimes one of them played steadily, and the other read every few minutes — in a sort of moaning voice. They made up all their own music, of course, and their own verse. They even made their own screens.

Mr. Bill Hackett appeared to be enchanted with these talented individuals. He was bending forward, listening, with an almost theatrical attentiveness, to every word they uttered.

'Yes! Yes!' he was crying. '*Sim*ply marvelous ——'

Robin, watching him, was feeling thoughtful. Although it was somewhat jarring to one's ego to be so flagrantly deserted, she appreciated his disappointment in her profession.

Obviously he had taken it for granted that she was a fellow artist; and then: 'I help manage a restaurant.' It *did* sound flat. There was no getting away from it! All these other people were doing such individual things, such picturesque things. While she ——

Suddenly, with a mental jerk, she wondered why she, too, wasn't doing something individual and picturesque. Why was she managing a restaurant? She had never intended to; she had never supposed, even three years ago, that she would find herself in such work. It had just — happened. As a matter of fact, when she came to think of it, all the things she had ever done had just happened — capriciously, without planning or preparation. That, probably, was why life had always seemed so tremendously adventurous.

But now, at this moment ——

She leaned forward, her elbows on the table, and stared at the bright company. She was dazzled a little by their glitter. She would have liked very much to be able to feel that she belonged to them, to be able to command their attention and respect. Poppet did, because she was an actress. Ricky did, because he was a poet. But she — she could do none of the things that these people considered interesting and important. She could only — well, what could she do? It wasn't an altogether new question. Several times before it had reared itself up in her thought, coldly, menacingly. What could she do? What talents did she possess? She had enthusiasm, alertness, a sort of haphazard efficiency in practical affairs — but where would these take her? What was she going to be doing ten years from now, twenty years, thirty? She didn't want to go on managing a restaurant. Of course not! Incredible! That, like all the other things she had done, was merely for the time being; merely until — until what? Until she found something high and splendid and absorbing, something to which she could give herself utterly. Poppet had her acting. Ricky had his poetry. And she, Robin ——

She saw herself on a great stage, her head thrown back, singing to a spellbound audience; she saw herself making eloquent speeches before international conferences, helping to mould together the peoples of the earth; or playing a violin; or dancing, with the breathless beauty of Pavlowa, poised on her toes, with her arms moving softly, exquisitely...

But when she sang she frequently got off key; and she found the tortuous meanderings of political conferences strangely puzzling; and she knew nothing about violins; and when she danced sometimes, alone in the apartment, with the hurdy-gurdy man playing outside in the street, it was only a sort of energetic prancing and whirling, round and round, with her shoes kicked off and her hair flopping into her eyes. And she couldn't paint, either — as so many of these people seemed to do; and she couldn't compose music, or write books, or design stage-sets. She couldn't even carve things out of soap...

Ricky, looking at her, said: 'Cheer up!'

She met his glance with grave eyes.

'What's the matter?' he asked confidentially.

'Oh — I don't know. I was just wondering what's going to become of me. Ultimately, I mean.'

'You might,' he suggested, 'enlarge your wondering to take in the rest of us.'

She shook her head. 'You're all settled. You're going to be a great poet. And Poppet's going to be a great actress. And Boots'll be an ambassador, or something. And Mimsy'll get married. But me ——'

'Oh, don't worry!' he said. 'You won't get left behind!'

He smiled at her; and she smiled back, slowly.

Then his glance veered off again.

Muriel Something-or-other, Poppet had said. Muriel — the word felt smooth in his mouth. She was sitting before one of the windows, with the sky behind her, and the wind stirring her brown hair and her green dress. She wasn't smoking, and she didn't seem to be talking much. She looked gentle, calm, aloof...

It was nearing sunset-time when they left the tea-house. Accompanied by Rand Tarvin, and Bill Hackett, and a stray girl or two, they went off to see the theater which was situated farther along the road on a larger wharf: a weather-beaten building, small, mouse-colored, with boarded-up windows and bare walls.

While the others were standing at the back, discussing the new play, Robin poked around by herself. She wandered through the wings, touching things, examining things; then she came out on to the stage and stood there for a few minutes, facing the dim rows of empty seats. She always felt a small, secret thrill when she found herself on the inner side of footlights. Always it was as if she were treading on enchanted ground. Strange ground and yet, once or twice, for a queer, fleeting moment, she had had a feeling that it wasn't strange; a feeling that — perhaps — somehow — she belonged on it — she, too, as well as Poppet. Perhaps, if she had tried, if things had been a bit different ——

Standing there, her thoughts traveled back to that day, some years ago, when the Kiplings, in answer to an advertisement for 'extras,' had turned up *en masse* at Henry Clumington's theater. Ricky had worn a helmet, she remembered, and carried a sword. And Boots had been a page or something. And she and Mimsy and Poppet had been peasant women, with funny head-dresses. They had had to run across the stage, screaming; and she and Poppet had screamed longer and louder and more harrowingly than any one else. Even Clumington had noticed it. 'Very good!' he had commented. 'But don't knock things down ——' And Poppet, panting there in the wings after their first performance, with her eyes like black fire, had said: 'I am going to be an actress, Robbie! I am going to be an actress!' And she, Robin, with her heart nearly bursting with excitement, had said, 'Me, too' — and dropped her water-jug with a terrific crash! Afterwards, when the play had run its course, Poppet had continued to haunt the theater. She had gone there steadily from school, day after day — prowling up and down corridors, gazing through door cracks, asking innumerable questions about lights and costumes and props. Frequently she had been bidden to clear out and stay out; several times she had been ejected by force. But it had been no use. She had always turned up again, cheerful, indomitable. After a while Clumington had granted her permission to sit in a corner of the rehearsal-room; and there, every afternoon, she was to have been found — listening, watching, her elbows resting on her knees and her chin cupped in her hands. And at last — oh, wonderful occasion! — she had been given the part of a maid: a maid who walked in, put a letter on the mantel, and walked out again. The rest of the Kiplings had turned up in the balcony, proud and thrilled. They had, much to every one's astonishment, spiritedly applauded the maid. And very soon after that had come another part, one with a line — 'It is Mr. Van Ralston, madam,' Poppet had announced with great aplomb — and then another, and still more; until eventually, at the opening of the next season, she had been accepted as a full-fledged member of the company. Pauline Kipling — her name on the program, her picture in the lobby between Pelham Marsh's and Miss Randolph's. Pauline Kipling — Actress!

But she, Robin —— She hadn't been able to spend her afternoons sitting in a rehearsal-room, serving a long and unremunerative apprenticeship. There had been work for her to do, money to be earned. There had been food, rent, clothes; and Mimsy's music-lessons; and Boots's college fund to build up, bit by bit. And even if there hadn't been these things; even if she had been free, with no one to look after but herself — would it have made any difference, would she have been able to succeed as Poppet had done? Something within her cried out, 'Yes — yes!' But she didn't know, not really. It was easy enough, of course, to picture herself as an actress. She could go through long, dramatic scenes in her head — weeping, laughing, moving with poise and vividness across an imaginary stage. Now she was a patriot, giving her life for her country; now she was Ibsen's Nora; now a mother fighting for her child; now a girl throwing herself before her lover, taking in her own breast the bullet that had been intended for his... Oh, it was easy, easy, to play like that, alone, in the secret theater of her mind. But what would happen to her if she were to be subjected to the rigorous discipline of the rehearsal-room? What would happen if, in the midst of a tragic scene, Clumington were to interrupt to criticize a gesture, to correct the pronunciation of a word? Would she be able to go on again, as Poppet could; or would all that bright flare of emotion within her flicker out abruptly, completely — leaving her suddenly cold, and embarrassed? She didn't know. But perhaps it would; perhaps, in spite of those momentary sensations of belonging here, inside the footlights, she wasn't of the stuff of which successful players were made. Perhaps, really, she was only a dreamer of somewhat melodramatic dreams...

On their way to the Point they saw several other people strolling in the same direction — Bren — Tod Hammond — the girl with the green dress and the brown hair. She was walking lightly, swaying a little, with her thin skirt swirling about her knees; and as the two groups met, and casually intermingled, Ricky found himself beside her.

She looked up. Her eyes were long-lashed, the cool grey of stones under water.

He introduced himself: 'I'm Richard Kipling — Poppet's brother.' And he thought: 'Who are you? Who are you?' eagerly, with a sudden quickening of hope in his heart.

She said: 'Oh, yes! Poppet's told us all about you. I'm Muriel Hinkley.' She lowered her eyelids for a moment, so that her lashes lay silken and pointed on her cheeks. Then she lifted them again. 'You're a poet, aren't you?'

'I — scribble a bit.'

'I *adore* poetry!' she said. 'Somebody told me you're having a book published in the fall. Are you?'

He nodded.

She widened her eyes this time; and he saw, suddenly, that they were quite empty, quite blank, like the fringed eyes of a doll.

She said: 'How *perfectly* divine! Aren't you terribly thrilled!' And a minute or two later she was slipping her arm through his, and asking: 'You don't mind if I hang on to you, do you? This road's so rough for my poor little feet.'

He said lightly: 'Charmed, of course ——' And he thought: 'You fool! You fool!' — meaning himself.

While the others were sitting together in a group, smoking and talking, Robin went off by herself — went climbing about the Point with a sort of energetic aimlessness. She leaped across crevices, and across the small, smooth pools that were lying here and there as green as emeralds; she scrambled through miniature canyons that provided a momentary surcease from the battering wind and the stinging spray. It was enormous fun! The sea flashed and crashed about the rocks; the last light of the day, striking it, was rich and splendid, and warm without holding the blistering heat of the early afternoon. She went up and down, in and out — not thinking about anything in particular, but conscious, deep within herself, that the doubts and the vague fears which Mr. Bill Hackett had all unknowingly set in motion at dinner-time, were still lurking at the back of her mind, still waiting to be dealt with...

After a while she found herself caught on a narrow ledge. It ended abruptly against a jagged wall; and there was no room to turn around, and no possibility of jumping off or of clambering higher. So she cupped her hands to her mouth and shouted:

'Help! Help! Lady in distress ——'

In a moment or two Denis appeared on the rocks above her, silhouetted against the sky. He looked down inquiringly.

'Ha! ha! ha!' he said, twirling an imaginary mustache. 'You're trapped!'

'Exactly!' she agreed.

'Shall I let down my golden tresses so that you can climb up them? Or would you prefer a knotted sheet?'

She laughed, crooking an arm over her head to keep her hair from blowing into her eyes. 'If you weren't such a lazy cuss, you'd come and give me a hand. Look, you could hop there — then there ——'

He bent forward and studied the proposed route. 'Too dangerous,' he decided. 'I might slip.'

'Ah, hurry up!' she pleaded. 'I want to watch the sun set.'

'The sun?' He gazed around vaguely. 'Oh, yes — there it is. Rather red.' He became absorbed in the sun: 'I regret to tell you that it is already going — going ——'

'Denis!' She looked threatening. 'If you don't rescue me immediately, I'll make a try for that rock!'

'Oh, no!' he protested hastily. 'You mustn't do that. Suppose you missed it! And, besides, you look so nice there — like a dryad. From an æsthetic point of view it would be downright wrong of me to remove you.'

She wrinkled her nose at him. Then she crouched forward a little, ready to spring: 'One — two ——'

He came climbing down, easily, rapidly. 'All right, all right,' he said. 'But you *are* a nuisance!' He swung himself into the gully below the ledge: 'Now, then — leap into my arms, Robina, but don't knock me over! Are you ready? Go ——' He caught her; deposited her on safe ground; and said: 'Don't mention it — although people *do* get medals for this sort of thing. Good Heavens! you're drenched!'

'Am I?' She patted herself. 'So I am. Well, it doesn't matter ——' She skipped off lightly, her fiber shoes clinging to the wet rocks. 'Come on,' she invited. 'Come and play with me.'

'Which means, I suppose, come and get stranded somewhere else.'

'Oh, no. We can' — she looked around — 'we can go up to the top, where we were this morning.'

'Where's the path? On this side?'

'Yes, I think so — yes, it *is*. Over there — *there*, donkey! Why don't you look where I'm pointing!'

'If I choose to look in the wrong direction,' he said haughtily, 'it's my own business. Will you lead? Or shall I lead? Or shall we go hand-in-hand?'

'Hand-in-hand,' she decided, and held hers out to him.

They climbed quickly, with the wind bolstering them up. Higher — higher — until they came to the flat, grassy space at the top. The sun had almost gone down now. It was in its last glory. Gulls flew silver-winged in the bright sky; the foam on the incoming waves was shot with red glints. It was a beautiful moment — beautiful and wild and spectacular, with the roar of the sea all about them, and the thrashing wind, and the scarlet-and-gold banners streaming overhead...

Robin ran to the very edge of the cliff and stood there, flushed and breathless, with her hair flying and her wet skirt plastered about her. She swayed a little in the wind, narrowing her eyes against it.

'Now, then,' Denis cautioned, 'don't go and fall off ——'

She only laughed at him.

The wind seemed to be passing through her, to be cleaning her all out, so that she felt empty — quite empty except for those doubts and fears lurking like dark beasts at the back of her consciousness. They were still there: when she stopped for a moment to think, she realized that. But she wasn't going to take any notice of them now; she would pretend that they didn't matter — that nothing mattered except the splendor and excitement of this moment.

She took a deep breath. She said: 'I feel — I feel as if I could walk on the waves like Jesus.' And she had a mad desire to step off the cliff, easily, lackadaisically, the way one did such things in dreams; to go singing and dancing across the sea, with the silver-winged gulls all about her...

But Denis reached out and drew her back a bit.

'For my own peace of mind,' he explained.

'Pooh!' she scoffed. 'You wouldn't care if I toppled over.'

'Of course not,' he agreed. 'But they might accuse me of pushing you ——'

She leaned back against him, conscious of his fingers closed round her wrist, of his chin pressed lightly into her hair.

The sun had gone down now; the vivid banners of color were being slowly withdrawn. Soon most of the sky was green — a pure, flawless green, exquisitely tranquil above the troubled sea. A star came out, far away; then another, and another...

She stood quite still, watching them.

And while she watched, Denis's fingers tightened on her wrist. He swung her round so that she faced him. He wasn't laughing now; he looked different, intent. He said: 'Robin — you darling' — and took her into his arms and kissed her, her throat, her mouth.

And suddenly, overwhelmingly, she knew! Of course, of course! All the time! It was like bursting out of a dark passage into illimitable light; it was like coming to the end of a tortuous journey.

'Denis — Denis ——' She was flinging her arms about him, radiant and trembling...

When the door opened, Poppet was getting into her pajamas by the light of one candle.

She glanced up: 'Hello! I thought you'd been drowned, or something.' She finished buttoning her trousers, then turned to the bed and threw back the blankets. 'D'you suppose we'll be able to manage? It'll be like the good old days at Mrs. Mac's, when we slept in layers.'

Robin was still standing in the doorway. She was motionless; but she had the look of one who had just stopped running, with the wind still lingering about her. She said: 'Oh, Poppet — listen! Listen! Something terribly exciting' — she caught her breath for a moment; and then: 'It's about Denis and me. We love one another.'

Poppet swung round, and stared. 'You *what?*'

'We love one another.'

She looked utterly flabbergasted. 'Good Lord!' she said. Robin came into the room and sat down; and she went on gazing at her, incredulous and dismayed. 'But I never thought of you being in love! I never *thought* ——' She sat down, too. She felt quite weak, as if some one had given her a terrific wallop. 'Are you sure?' she asked.

Robin laughed, hugging her arms about her knees. 'Oh, yes ——' Of course, of course!

'But I never *thought* of it!' Poppet insisted blankly.

'Well, neither did I — until to-night. I mean, I — I've loved him a long time, I guess, but I didn't know that I did. Wasn't it silly!' She laughed again. Then she suddenly grew grave; her voice sounded uncertain, anxious: 'Poppet — I say, Poppet! you are glad, aren't you?'

'I don't know. I'm sort of stunned.'

'But you like him? You all like him?'

'Oh, sure! Only' — she hesitated, drawing her brows together — 'only I always supposed that if, by any chance, you ever *did*, it would be with — well, Lawrence of Arabia, or somebody of that sort. All uniforms and splash. Denis' — she hesitated again — 'he's, you know, he's so — ordinary.'

'Ordinary?' Robin repeated. 'Oh, *no* ——' Of course not! How absurd! Denis! Denis! Even his name was like a chime in her heart.

Poppet had taken a handkerchief out of her pajama pocket, and was wiping her nose. 'I suppose you're going to get married. Have you decided when?'

'No, not yet. We didn't talk much about — details.'

'Try October,' she suggested, 'with the falling leaves, and a honeymoon in the South, and ——' She stopped abruptly, and jerked her chin out. 'I'm not glad!' she said in a fierce voice. 'I hate it! I'm jealous!'

Robin turned very red. 'Don't be an idiot!' she snapped. 'You know —— Look here, Poppet! you know perfectly well it won't make an atom of difference to us!'

'Oh, yes, it will ——'

'It won't, Poppet! It *won't!*' She felt upset and angry, quite astonishingly angry: 'How dare you say such a thing! Of course it won't!' Then her voice changed, softened: 'I promise,' she said. 'I promise.'

Poppet looked up again. 'Perhaps you'll get over it,' she suggested hopefully.

Robin shook her head. 'No,' she said. 'I shan't get over it.'

After she had undressed, she blew the candle out, and got into bed beside Poppet. The window in front of them was wide open, holding a black square of sky studded with stars. The air felt cool, and smelled strongly of the sea. There was a faint sound of music from up the road, intermittent gusts of it, interwoven with the whirring of the wind and the rhythmical roar of the waves against the Point.

'Bren's throwing a party,' Poppet explained. 'Hey! shove up a bit, old dear — you're hogging the pillow.'

They lay silent for a moment or two; then:

'Robin ——'

'Yes?'

'You *are* quite sure about it?'

'Oh, yes!'

'It seems sort of funny, you know. You're so *different* — I can't imagine anybody being in love with you.'

'That's because I'm in the family,' Robin decided. 'Families always seem different. To themselves, I mean.'

'Do they? Mm, I suppose they do. Well — good-night.'

'Good-night ——'

Another silence; and then:

'I say, Robin! I do hope you'll — you'll be awfully happy.'

'Oh, I will, Poppet! I *am!*'

'And we'll get along fine, of course. It won't make any difference to us.'

Robin didn't answer for a moment. Then she suddenly shuffled her feet against Poppet's, the way she used to do, years ago, on cold nights. 'As if it could!' she said. 'As if it *could* ——'

She lay there with her eyes wide open. She was tingling with consciousness; she felt as if she would never be able to go to sleep again, never want to, never need to.

The night seemed extraordinarily alive. The stars were fierce against her eyes; the wind, leaping into the room, brought with it ragged scraps of music that went prancing impishly through her head. After a while she turned a little, and found that Poppet was asleep now, with her face pressed into the crook of one arm. Very carefully she sat up, then slid out of bed. She moved quietly towards the window. The sea lay below, endless, glimmering, with the star-studded sky cupped over it. She watched it for a few minutes, leaning across the sill; then, on a sudden impulse, she drew on her tennis shoes, flung an old flannel coat of Poppet's over her pajamas, and tiptoed out on to the landing and down the stairs...

In the road the music sounded clearer, steadier. She paused for a moment to listen to it; then, turning in the opposite direction, she began to run rapidly towards the Point. The wharves and shacks were solid shadows on either side of her, with the water gleaming between them. Here and there they were patched with a bright window, or a lighted doorway. There were more gusts of music — voices — laughter. Then the colony was left behind, and the rocks were looming up ahead in dark and jagged confusion.

The tide was high now. The sound of the waves was overpowering; and she could see the spray springing far into the air, clouds of it, pale against the blackness of the cliff. Soon she could feel it, and feel the rocks under her feet. She began to go more slowly. She stumbled, then stumbled again; farther along she slipped and fell sideways, scraping the back of her arm on a gritty ledge. But it didn't matter. She felt so extraordinarily buoyant that she was scarcely conscious of having fallen. It was as if her body were no more substantial than the leaping spray; as if it were part of the darkness, one with the wind...

Now she had found the path. She began to race up it, up and up, towards the long cascades of glittering stars; and when she reached the top, she threw herself on the grass, and lay there motionless.

This was where Denis had been. Denis — Denis ——

She buried her face in the grass. She was so happy, so profoundly and overwhelmingly happy, that she couldn't think much; all her thoughts seemed, for the time being, to be burned up in a bright blaze of emotion. She could only lie there, knowing that her fears and doubts had been utterly vanquished, feeling that the splendid and absorbing 'something' for which she had always been waiting had come to her at last...

Ricky had got up early, and had been pottering around by himself among the wharves. It was going to be another dazzling day. Already the sun felt hot against his face. The wind had fallen in the night; and the sea was smooth this morning, and lustrous, with a ship far out on it, a silver ship delicately etched on the fresh blue of the sky. Now, finding that the colony was wide-awake, he made his way through the grocery-store — with its intermingled smells of soap and coffee and onions, and new loaves of bread stacked on the counter — and up the steep stairway in the rear.

Robin was next door, washing in what appeared to be a community bathroom; and Poppet was sitting on the end of the bed in her pajamas, filing her nails.

'Hello!' he said. He crossed the room and leaned against the window-sill. 'A nice sort of place you got us for the night, I must say! A zoo on a small scale. Not to mention bacchanalian revels ——'

She put the nail file down, and regarded him mournfully. 'Well — what d'you think of it?'

'Think of what?'

'Good Heavens! Didn't he tell you? Ricky' — she made a dramatic gesture — 'the most appalling thing's happened!'

'Robin ——' he began anxiously.

'Yes, Robin. *And* Denis, damn him! They're going to get married!'

He relaxed, and looked pleasantly skeptical.

'I mean it, old dear!'

'You don't.'

'But I *do!*'

'Robin and Denis?'

'Exactly! They decided last night. It must have been the sea, the stars — all the romantic paraphernalia. And she looks so — so sort of *rapturous!* Wait till you see her! It's heartrending!'

'But, good Lord!' he said, 'I ——'

'Of course not! I didn't either!' She got up and pulled some silk under-things off the bureau. 'I knew they were fond of one another; that was more or less visible to the naked eye. But — *married!*' She sat down again, and began to unbutton her pajamas. 'Look out of the window,' she requested.

He stared at the pale outline of the ship, at the soft, silver plume of smoke. Robin and Denis! Robin —— He had a queer, bleak feeling. He bent forward a little and lit a cigarette.

'I don't know why it should seem so — odd, but it does, doesn't it?'

'Odd!' Poppet flung her pajamas across a chair. 'It's tragic! It's as if something's being broken up. First Mimsy; now ——'

He tossed the match out of the window.

'If only she didn't go into everything with such a crash! That's the worst of it! She can't dabble. Henceforth, Denis'll be her sun and moon, I suppose. And we'll ——'

'We're different,' he said.

She hooked her brassière on, then discovered that one of the shoulder-straps was torn. She felt suddenly and savagely annoyed:

'Well, it's your fault, anyhow! You dragged him into the family!'

'Don't be an ass, Poppet.'

'I'm not an ass, thanks! You know very well ——'

Their mutual distress flared up into a brief, pointless, but rather comforting quarrel...

Then Robin came upstairs again. She was wearing a blue kimono of Poppet's with butterfly sleeves. She looked, somehow, very youthful — almost childlike, with her hair brushed back tidily and her face still pink from a cold sponge. She hung up the towel she had been carrying, and turned round:

'Oh — hello, Ricky.'

'Hello, Robin.'

Standing there opposite one another they were both conscious of a feeling of embarrassment.

He said: 'Poppet's just told me about it. I'm awfully glad it's Denis. We're all fond of him.'

'Sure!' Poppet agreed heartily. Then, as no one seemed to know what to say next, she casually knocked over the jug of drinking-water on the table, thereby providing them with an opportunity to become briskly engaged in picking up pieces of broken glass...

A little later on Denis's voice hailed them from the foot of the stairs: 'I'm hungry!' he announced. 'I want my breakfast!'

Poppet opened the door quickly. 'We're coming!' she shouted back. 'Hurry up, Robin! Where're your shoes?'

'I don't know — *where* are they? Oh, thanks ——' She sounded rather breathless. 'I say, don't wait for me! You two go along — I'll be ready in a few minutes ——'

So they left her alone in the room, and descended upon Denis.

Poppet seized his hand and pumped it up and down with a sort of curt friendliness: 'Welcome to the family,' she said. 'I'm sure I don't know what she sees in you, but you're a lucky guy and I hope you realize it!'

And Ricky said: 'Congratulations, old man! We're a bit overwhelmed, you know. It's so sudden.'

And Poppet said: 'If you don't do right by her, brother, we'll wring your handsome neck! And, incidentally, aren't you extremely fortunate in your prospective in-laws! Think of being related to me! Doesn't your heart bound at the prospect?'

And all the time they were looking at Denis, curiously, intently. Why had Robin fallen in love with him? Why had she chosen him above every one else in the world...

Upstairs Robin was rushing excitedly about the room. She was dressed now, but she was still very busy doing things. She poured a great deal of Poppet's most expensive perfume down her neck. She rubbed toilet water on her hands. She flew back to the mirror, and started brushing her hair again with quick, nervous movements; and then she noticed that her skin was red and rather parched-looking after yesterday's sun, and she threw the brush down and began powdering herself hurriedly. But the powder didn't cling very well to her face, so she jerked open a drawer, helped herself to some of Poppet's cream, then picked up the puff again. There, that was better! That was all right! She lowered her lids, and brushed the powder out of her lashes. She pinched her eyebrows — and it occurred to her suddenly that they were rather thick. Perhaps they were too thick. Perhaps she ought to have them thinned at a beauty-parlor. Shaped — plucked — whatever they called it ——

But she must hurry! She mustn't keep Denis waiting like this ——

She threw the puff into the drawer, and seized a comb. There was something the matter with her hair parting. It should be a little nearer the middle. Shouldn't it? Or did it look better this way? Which? Which? She was in a fever of uncertainty. She decided to leave it as it was ——

'Robin!' they were calling.

'Just a minute — just a minute ——'

Poppet's lip rouge in its bright lacquer case caught her attention; and she snatched it up and daubed some on her mouth. But she smudged it, because her hand was shaking uncontrollably. She was shaking all over. She said: 'Oh, damn! Oh, *damn!*' — and could have burst into tears. She wiped the stuff off on the bureau cover; and, as she bent down, she noticed how crumpled her dress was. The thin skirt was criss-crossed with creases. It looked wretched! Why hadn't she brought another dress with her? And why, anyhow, had she worn this particular one? There was her flowered silk, for instance —— Oh, idiot! idiot! Why hadn't she worn her flowered silk dress!

She leaned forward for the last time and stared at herself in the mirror. Her hair was lustrous after so much brushing; her eyes were very bright and very clear. But this wasn't enough — it wasn't nearly enough! She longed, suddenly and passionately, to be beautiful. Marvelously, *staggeringly* beautiful! She couldn't remember ever having desired such a thing before — or never, at any rate, with this fierce, this almost painful, intensity. Now, for the moment, she was conscious of nothing else. If only she were beautiful! Oh, if only she were beautiful, for Denis ——

'Robin!' They were calling her again; and she flew to the door, then faltered, gripping the knob in both hands. Her heart was pounding; she felt herself stricken by a sudden and agonizing shyness. How would she greet Denis? What would she say to him? After the intimacy of last evening...

She forced herself to open the door, to go out on the landing.

And then, in a moment, everything was all right. At the bottom of the stairs Denis was waiting for her. He was laughing. He was just as he had always been. She forgot that she wanted to be beautiful. She forgot that her dress was crumpled. She felt, as she ran down towards him, nothing but a great warmth in her heart...

They had breakfast at the end of one of the wharves, under a cherry-striped awning — with everybody rushing around in search of salt and marmalade, and coffee cooling in the wind, and paper napkins blowing off like kites. Bill

Hackett was there, in a canary-yellow bathing-suit; and Rand Tarvin; and hordes of art students, in the inevitable blue trousers and colored smocks; and the hot sunshine slanted in on them; and the air was full of the clicking of dishes, and laughter and chatter, and the soft swush of the waves, and the flapping of the cherry-striped awning overhead.

They left for home soon afterwards. Ricky drove the car up to the grocery-store; and somebody attached a number of soup-cans and several ancient fish to the back of it; and somebody else chalked various pungent inscriptions on the doors; and a great many other people swarmed about the departing trio and issued cheerful invitations to come again.

'Oh, we *will!*' Robin promised. And she felt suddenly and tremendously fond of every one of them; and of the painted shacks, and the decrepit wharves, and all the gay bravado of the place.

Then Poppet jumped on to the running-board and embraced them ardently, and deluged them with messages for Boots and Henry and Mrs. McMasters; and then Ricky honked the horn, and the cans all rattled and the fish all jiggled, and they went tearing down the road...

5

It was while his family were absent that Boots, after a period of admirable restraint, at last came to verbal blows with Mrs. Sabine Rolf, and, with a flourish, resigned from her services before she had collected herself sufficiently to fire him.

She had — with the delicately fastidious expression that was one of her special accomplishments — objected to the books and magazines which he was in the habit of reading while waiting for her in the car. She had glanced at them. Certainly! She felt at perfect liberty to glance at them since they were being perused on her property. And they struck her as being somewhat — ah — Revolutionary in character.

Boots rejected the term, and she suggested Radical with the air of one richly equipped with labels. He observed, not without warmth, that, even if they were, it was clearly his own business; to which statement she took exception by intimating, with a steely blandness, that, so long as she chose to retain him as her chauffeur, his business in some mysterious fashion automatically became hers. From this debatable point they passed into the contradictory stage; and beyond that into a region of heated, if vague, generalities. Mrs. Rolf's ancestors were marshaled into the fray: extraordinary gentlemen of unerring judgment and with military careers to shame a Napoleon. They were presented as being, spiritually if not actually, opposed to the reading-matter under dispute — as, also, were George Washington, the framers of the Constitution, and, with unflagging assurance, God Himself.

She talked with superb dignity, and as if she were addressing a multitude. She insinuated, in due time, that he was attempting to corrupt the Nation; she accused him of being a traitor to the ideals of his fathers — conjuring up a vision of said fathers leaning out of heaven, like the Blessed Damozel, with their wings fluttering with agitation and a shocked look on their countenances...

Boots became very red and very solemn. After a few minutes he took a deep breath: 'Hang your ancestors!' he said.

Mrs. Rolf gaped, and quivered.

'*Hang* them,' he repeated earnestly. 'And stop gabbling.'

'Gabbling ——' Mrs. Rolf panted.

'You make me sick!' he informed her; and the words sounded so pleasing that he restated them with relish: 'You've made me sick for a long time!'

'Oh ——' Mrs. Rolf breathed in a strangled voice.

He thrust his hands into his pockets. He felt reckless, and a trifle giddy. He said, very deliberately: 'You're a crank! I've often wanted to tell you so before.' A great many other things that he had often wanted to tell her bubbled up within him. He took a second deep breath: 'It's people like you in the world who keep everything messed up; who make wars — who — who —— Of course you don't like my books! They're too good for you! They talk about things you don't understand! They scare you, because they're intelligent. They scare you, because they're idealistic ——' He talked for a long time, quoting other people at great length without stopping to explain that he was quoting, so that he sounded extraordinarily polished and precise. All the silent revolt of the last six weeks flared into words; all the convictions that he had formed and hoarded gushed out now in a dramatic torrent. It was wonderful! It was the sort of speech that hitherto he had given only in his dreams.

He came to an end at last, although with obvious reluctance.

'Of course,' he concluded, with the air of one determined to be scrupulously just, 'you, personally, can't be blamed for everything. Your upbringing accounts for a lot.'

With a stupendous effort Mrs. Rolf wobbled to her feet: 'How *dare* — you ——'

'Not at all,' he said, speaking over her gasps with imperturbable dignity. 'I liked it.'

'You ——'

'*Liked* it. Telling you, I mean. It's time somebody did.'

'Insults ——' Mrs. Rolf heaved out.

'Truth,' Boots amended.

She gripped her *pince-nez* and shoved them on to her thin, pink nose; but before she could sputter again he had made his last gesture:

'I'm leaving,' he said pleasantly, with the air of one refusing ardent pleas to remain. 'You'll have to get somebody else to tote you round to your hen-parties.'

With the slightest suggestion of a swagger he marched out of the room and towards the back passage; then, changing his mind, he turned and strutted noisily through the front hall, through the front doorway, and down the sweeping flight of front steps. He felt, with a glow of satisfaction, that it was an exit befitting an advocate of World Peace, an exponent of Universal Brotherhood; and he trusted that from somewhere behind the nearest window Mrs. Rolf was witnessing it in bleak distress.

He walked homeward in a haze of triumph — ignoring traffic signals and barely surviving the consequent confusion. Fondly he went over each detail of his epic speech; fondly he recalled the scarlet face that had confronted him.

'Crank!' he muttered again to himself, and smiled a pleased smile.

Truth, he reflected, was bound to bear fruit. He supposed that, henceforth, Mrs. Rolf would be, if not reformed, at any rate greatly changed...

'When they returned the next day, Robin and Ricky were given a brief synopsis of the interview. On the whole they sympathized with what he had done; in fact, they rather troubled his spirits by coming to the conclusion that he should have done it sooner: 'You were despising her, Boots — and accepting money from her.'

'Why, so I was!' He hadn't thought of that. He looked worried; he wondered if, in some fashion or other, he ought to raise funds and return to Mrs. Rolf everything that he had earned. The idea rather appealed to him: stalking into her presence and flinging a handful of bills at her feet, with a few choice words on the subject of tainted money. He would think it over...

That evening he shut himself up in his room for several hours, while an intention that he had been vaguely cherishing for quite a time flowered into expression. He wrote an article. His tirade against Mrs. Rolf — or, rather, against the order of which he felt Mrs. Rolf to be an almost flawless representative — formed the main body of the composition, and was strengthened and embellished by fresh arguments, much involved imagery, and a passionate indictment of various persons and organizations — all of them carefully and candidly named. It was a most stirring piece of work, making up in vigor what it lacked in tact, and admitting not the slightest tinge of doubt as to the veracity and potency of its statements.

When it was finished, he read it to Robin and Ricky, standing before them with ink on his chin and a glow of satisfaction in his heart. 'It *is* good, isn't it!' he said. 'You see, I've taken the thing from an entirely new angle — and I haven't toned it down to suit anybody! It's frank, of course; but it's *true!* Any one can see that it's true! I expect it'll waken a lot of people up!' He felt a sense of exhilaration befitting one about to render a necessary service to the human race; and sent the article off to the most important magazine he could think of...

It came back again at the end of four days. It was accompanied by a large, creamy rejection card, at the bottom of which some one had scribbled: 'Too dogmatic — and it's all been said before.'

Finding himself thus stranded without a job, Boots accepted Robin's suggestion that, for the remainder of the summer, he work at the Tavern in the capacity of bus-boy. But when Marcia Rolf was consulted, she unexpectedly objected to the arrangement: 'I'm sorry, Robin, but I really don't see how we can have him. Aunt Sabine would very much resent it. She's still extremely upset at what he did. You understand, don't you?' Inasmuch as Aunt Sabine possessed a certain control over her purse-strings, she found it expedient to keep in that lady's good graces. 'Of course,' as an afterthought, 'if he cared to apologize ——'

Robin shook her head. 'He wouldn't!' she said.

So, with the Tavern definitely closed to him, Boots sought elsewhere for employment. He found it, with the assistance of Henry, in a few days — a job looking after the lockers of a bathing-house at a fashionable club; but before starting work there he decided to go off and spend the week-end with Poppet.

On the heels of this decision came the usual problem: Should he take Hilda with him, or Daphne? There was the long ride, for which he would much prefer to have Hilda; but there was also the colony itself, at which Daphne would be undoubtedly effective, in her silken sport clothes and with her new, and mysteriously acquired, tan. It was a perplexing matter; and, thinking it over, it seemed to him — as it had seemed recently on several other occasions — that it was going to become more and more perplexing as time went on. He would, he supposed, get married in a few years. But to whom? He might, of course, meet some one who successfully combined the graces of Daphne with the intellectual virtues of Hilda. But, on the other hand, he might not. He might have to choose between them. He tried, as an experiment, to imagine himself married to Hilda — but it occurred to him, quite suddenly, that it was extremely doubtful if Hilda would ever consent to such a thing. She would live with him, probably; but for the institution of marriage she had a sweeping and unswerving scorn. She said it was immoral. Although he didn't altogether agree with her, he respected her conviction and appreciated the soundness of at least two thirds of her arguments. Daphne, of course, would be utterly unable to understand such a viewpoint. Daphne would consider living together without benefit of clergy both sinful and embarrassing. And yet, while Hilda didn't even care to have him hold her arm when they crossed a street, Daphne, the fundamentally conventional, had permitted him to kiss her the first time he had taken her to a dance. The two of them were a puzzle, there was no getting away from that. The whole situation was a puzzle.

He rather shirked the issue by inviting Henry instead.

It was after noon when they arrived at the colony. Following Robin's instructions they twisted in and out among the narrow lanes until they reached the Faggot Road grocery-store. Then, parking the car between a banana-stand and a popcorn vender, they pushed their way through the people congregated about the counters — for social purposes, apparently, rather than business — and raced upstairs. But the room was empty; and upon making inquiries below they learned that Poppet was rehearsing at the theater. So they solicited a few directions from a languid-looking youth in an apricot-colored smock, and started off for the wharf, which, with an exquisitely manicured finger, he graciously pointed out to them...

The door of the theater was unlatched. Opening it, they made their way quietly through the lobby and into the house itself. They found themselves at the back, and in semi-darkness. Down near the front half a dozen figures were discernible, scattered about in the first few rows with their heads and shoulders silhouetted against the brightness of the stage. They were watching Poppet, a tall blonde girl, and a stoutish man dressed as a priest go through a scene together. The blonde girl was rocking herself back and forth, moaning. The priest was tolling out: 'It is too late now. I warned you that if you didn't tell me ——' A voice (Boots recognized it as Rand Tarvin's) said sharply: 'For God's sake, Warren, don't *chant!*' Then somebody shouted to somebody else in the wings; and the lighting underwent a gradual change. 'No! That won't do!' Tarvin's voice again. The change was repeated, twice, three times. Still it was found unsatisfactory. A man in overalls marched out on to the stage. He was, obviously, in a bad temper; and for the next five or seven minutes there was an animated discussion between him and a shadowy but very voluble individual in the second row. The blonde girl went on rocking back and forth, murmuring her lines over to herself. The priest lit a cigarette. In due time the discussion, having degenerated into a brisk exchange of insults, was terminated by force; and the scene continued. Poppet, talking excitedly, flung herself across the room and snatched something off the table. She was asked to do this again, then again. At the end of the fifth rehearsal she came down to the footlights, agitated, almost weeping: 'What's the matter with me?' she asked. 'What *is* the matter ——' Rand Tarvin got up and chatted to her in a low tone for several moments; and she listened to him intently, stooping forward a little, her hands clasped together. Then she went back and plunged into the scene once more — fierily, but modifying certain gestures, slurring a phrase that she had been emphasizing, biting out another. When it was finished she swung round, anxious for comment. 'Good!' was the verdict of the dim figures in front. And, 'That's it, Polly!' Tarvin pronounced. She took a deep breath, and wiped the back of her hand across her forehead.

A little later she made her exit; and Boots saw her emerge from a small door beside the stage and turn into the fourth row. 'Come on,' he directed; and with Henry close behind him he hurried down the aisle and dropped into the seat next to Poppet's. 'Hello!' he said.

She turned round quickly. 'Bless my soul!' Her eyes widened with surprise. 'If it isn't little Boots! Where on earth did you spring from?'

'Albania — *via* the Suez Canal. Look! Henry's here, too!'

She leaned across him. 'Why, so he is! Hello, Henry! How are you? Where's your hand?' She shook it vigorously. 'Are there any more of you ——'

'Shut up!' one of the dim figures requested.

The blonde girl was moaning: 'I won't! I won't! I don't care what you do to me! I don't care what happens ——'

'Have you been in here very long?' Poppet whispered.

'About twenty minutes.'

'Oh! Then you saw me — my grand scene?'

They nodded.

'It was pretty awful, I suppose.'

'Not bad,' Boots said, quite graciously. 'But you *do* gabble! And I don't like the way you've got your hair done. It looks all right from the front, but the back's rotten.'

'Any other little thing?' she inquired.

'Well, your legs, of course ——'

'Oh, *please!*'

'You wound them,' he continued relentlessly, 'four times.'

She didn't answer; and since it was decidedly unusual for Poppet not to have a tart retort on the end of her tongue, he glanced at her questioningly. The light from the stage was gray-gold against her face: it lit up the full, rich curves of her mouth — her eyes, dark and momentarily inscrutable under half-lowered lids. She looked tired, rather surprisingly subdued; and it occurred to him that she had probably been slogging away here since early morning. So he observed, somewhat more benevolently: 'Well, anyhow, you're a damn sight better than that blonde. She acts like a half-wit.'

'That,' Poppet said, 'is what she's supposed to be ——'

The rehearsal had been over for some time. Poppet had been summoned to the wardrobe-room to have a costume fitted; and Boots and Henry were wandering about the house waiting for her. The stoutish man, having exchanged his priest's garb for a striped bathing-suit, had already left; and now the blonde girl passed them, accompanied by the last of the half a dozen people who had been sitting in front.

The place was very quiet. The strange, melancholy atmosphere that belongs to a deserted theater was beginning to settle over it...

Boots leaned against the wooden rail at the back, and yawned. 'I'm hungry,' he remarked. 'I wish she'd buck up.' At the end of another three minutes he decided that it was time he bucked her up himself; so he strode down the aisle and opened the small door at the side of the stage. It led straight into the wings. Directly opposite it there was another door, leading into a passage that presumably ran towards the dressing-rooms. Since it was pitch-dark, and the floor felt uneven under his feet, he had to make his way slowly, fumblingly. He could hear the distant whir of a sewing-machine. He sniffed — and recognized the odor of grease-paint, the musty fragrance of stale powder. Then a light was suddenly switched on ahead of him; and he saw Poppet, in a green dress, coming across a hallway towards the passage.

He was about to hail her when Rand Tarvin appeared from the other side of the hall. Poppet paused, and turned to him. They said something to one another. Then with an abrupt, a curiously graceful movement, he took her in his arms, bent her backwards a little, kissed her silently and savagely.

Boots couldn't see Poppet's face; he could only see her fingers — outspread for an instant, like the fingers of a frightened child, then curving tensely, gripping the dark stuff of Rand Tarvin's coat.

A moment later they were standing apart again. There was something almost theatrical in the swiftness and smoothness of the incident. It might have been a scene from a play. But it wasn't, of course. Boots, turning quickly and fumbling his way back into the wings, back into the shadowy house, knew that it wasn't...

When Poppet joined them several minutes later, she looked poised, impassive. She said: 'I'm sorry to've kept you waiting. They had three or four things they wanted me to try on ——'

Outside again, the sun struck them brilliantly. They strolled to the end of the wharf and sat down there, dangling their legs over the side. A motor-boat roared past them; farther off, there were a number of small yachts — their sails moving white and trim against the still blue of the sky.

Poppet folded her hands in her lap, and stared across the water. 'Swell, isn't it?'

Boots nodded.

'Would you rather eat out here, or in a tea-house?'

'Here,' he decided. 'Where do we get the grub?'

She turned a little, and pointed back towards the road: 'At Caniper's — that yellow place. They'll put up a basket for us.'

Henry promptly volunteered to go and get it. 'What do you want, Poppet?'

'Oh, I don't care. I'm not hungry. What about you, Boots?'

'Lobster,' he requested; 'and masses of sandwiches.'

Henry strode down the wharf. Henry possessed an extraordinary talent for making himself useful to other people in general and to the Kiplings in particular...

After he had gone, Boots and Poppet sat silent for a few minutes, watching the sailboats. Then Boots took a deep breath, preparatory to diving into uncertain waters: 'Look here,' he began, speaking very deliberately. 'Look here, are you in love with Rand Tarvin?' Without glancing at her, he was conscious that Poppet had become suddenly rigid. She didn't answer him for a moment or two; then:

'What makes you ask that?' she inquired.

He felt uncomfortable but determined. 'I saw you — kiss each other.'

'Oh!' The exclamation was so soft and swift that he could make nothing out of it. He looked at her sideways, and saw that her eyes were still riveted on the boats. 'Are you?' he repeated.

She observed in a small, perfectly smooth voice: 'I don't see that that has anything to do with you.'

He was nettled by the rebuff. He found himself assuming — instinctively — an aggressively protective attitude of which Hilda, he felt sure, would very strongly have disapproved. 'Don't be an idiot!' he said. 'I'm not going to have a guy like Tarvin mauling ——'

She turned on him then, in a flash. 'Shut up!' she ground out. '*Shut up*, Boots!' Her eyes were black, blazing; her voice was so passionate that he was startled by it, and nonplussed. He drew his brows together: he felt that it would be decidedly awkward to drop the matter at this point, but he wasn't at all certain how he ought to proceed with it. If Poppet had been merely angry, he could — as usual — have flared up in return; but he had been arrested by something curious in her voice, something that was more subtle and far more poignant than anger. It was as if, under the harshness of her words, she had cried to him: 'Don't hurt me! Please don't hurt me!' It was as if she had thrown her hands out in front of her to ward off his interference.

He was genuinely upset at this undertone. 'But look here, Poppet — I don't want to butt in. I only want to know ——'

She had turned away and was staring across the sea again, staring through the white sails. Without moving, she said: 'Very well! Since you ask — I do love him.'

Boots was conscious of an unpleasant mental jolt. It was one thing to suspect such a fact, and quite another to be definitely informed of it. He sat silent for several moments; then, 'I'm sorry,' he told her candidly. 'I wish you didn't, Poppet.' After a second pause he went on again, sounding a bit pompous in his desire not to betray how distressed he was: 'I'm not much on mud-slinging, but it's pretty well known that — well —— Tarvin hasn't got a particularly clean reputation. I think you ought to ——'

Her voice struck across his, curtly: 'I don't believe you can tell me anything that I don't know, Boots, so there's no need to begin.'

He looked puzzled. 'Well, in that case — why on earth do you love him?'

She didn't answer.

'I expect,' he pronounced gravely, 'it's just an infatuation. I expect you'll get over it.' He heard her draw her breath in sharply; and it occurred to him that perhaps she didn't want to get over it. 'You're not going to marry him, are you?' he asked.

Poppet gave an abrupt laugh. 'Marry!' She might have been picking the word up and dangling it in front of her by its tail. 'Rand Tarvin married!' She laughed again. She seemed to find the idea peculiarly amusing.

'Well, all right,' he cut in, rather irritably. 'What *are* you going to do?'

She shrugged her shoulders. 'I don't know,' she said. 'I don't know——' And then suddenly, capriciously, she began to cry, leaning forward a little, her hands pressed against her mouth.

Boots turned very red. 'Oh, I say, Poppet ——'

She was shaking all over; she sounded utterly miserable, utterly bewildered.

He took his handkerchief out of his pocket. 'Here.' He shoved it under her arm.

She tried to control herself: 'I'm sorry,' she mumbled. 'Sorry! I didn't mean ——'

'Of course not,' he agreed hastily. 'You're tired. You've been rehearsing a lot. People often cry when they're tired.' He glanced round to see if any one was near, and recognized a familiar figure coming towards them. 'Here's Henry!' he warned her in a quick whisper. She raised her head, agitated; but: 'It's all right,' he declared. 'You mop up your face a bit, and I'll go and talk to him ——'

He met Henry before he had reached the door of the theater, and insisted, almost violently, that he inspect a motor-boat that was bobbing up and down at the side of the wharf. 'Look at *that!*' he directed. 'And *that* ——'

When they returned to Poppet, they found her with her nose freshly powdered, and holding one hand above her eyes because the sun, as Boots pointed out, was exceedingly bright...

The second act was over. Most of the audience had gone out on the wharf for a smoke; but Boots and Henry were still sitting in the fifth row, their feet propped comfortably on the rungs of the chairs in front of them. Farther down the house, in the aisle, Rand Tarvin was chatting with several people. Boots had been watching him for some time; and he had discovered — and admitted the discovery grudgingly — that Rand Tarvin's face was undeniably fascinating to look at. Now, in repose for a moment, it was moody, almost sullen; now it was quizzical, with the eyes narrowed and the long, sloping brows quirked a bit with a beguiling adroitness. Now arrogant — speculative — the next instant nothing but a suave mask. Boots, while acknowledging its effectiveness, felt a trifle suspicious of such facial eloquence. He wondered if it was unconscious, instinctive; or if Tarvin was mentally deciding: 'Now I'll twist my mouth to the left and look rueful.' He found himself wishing that he had brought Hilda along after all. Hilda was very good at deducing things (especially unpleasant things, such as sexual complexes) from people's countenances. Perhaps she would have been able to help him here — to tell him just how much of a *poseur* was this person with whom Poppet had unfortunately fallen in love...

The people he had been talking with had moved off, and Rand Tarvin was going out now. Boots, on a sudden impulse, got up, hurried across the aisle, and followed him through the small door that opened on to the less-frequented side of the wharf. It was quiet here, and everything was bright with moonlight. The waves were coming in so gently that they made only a soft, slapping sound—black and silver waves, with the anchored boats rising on them a little, then sinking, then rising again.

Tarvin had strolled to the edge of the wharf, and was taking a cigarette out of a metal case that gleamed sharply in the moonlight.

Boots went up to him. 'Good-evening,' he said.

'Oh — good-evening. Smoke?'

'No, thanks.' He planted his feet apart, and clasped his hands behind his back. 'I want to talk to you,' he announced.

Tarvin struck a match. 'Yes?' his voice was pleasant, courteous.

Boots plunged into the matter without any tactful preliminaries: 'It's about Poppet,' he explained. 'I want to know if you're in love with her.'

The match was flipped on to the water. There was a moment's silence; then, 'As a matter of fact, my dear Ricky ——'

'I'm not Ricky. I'm — uh — Barrett.'

'Pardon! But as a matter of fact, my dear Barrett — I really don't feel under any obligation to answer you.'

Boots was dogged. 'It's none of my business,' he acknowledged, 'but Poppet's unhappy — I know she's unhappy, she started crying this afternoon — and I'm not going to stand around and — and ——' He began to founder a bit. He thought: 'Oh, hell! what am I trying to get at, anyway!'

Tarvin turned to him. He spoke softly, with a scarcely perceptible curtness: 'Look here,' he said, 'I don't care to see Poppet unhappy any more than you do. But I'm afraid you won't be able to help matters by — this sort of thing. As you remarked, it's really none of your business!'

Boots was looking at him very seriously, very intently. The moonlight was on his face — paler, and, in some subtle fashion, more revealing than sunshine. It struck across his high cheek-bones and his pointed chin; it lit up the curves of his mobile and rather sulky mouth. As Boots stood there, his brows drawn together a little, and his hands still clasped behind his back, it seemed to him that for the first time he was perceiving the actual Rand Tarvin: not merely the figure of a successful playwright, not the suave-mannered and smart-tongued rake that rumor presented him as being, but a person who, under the glittering surface of his sophistication, was essentially uncomplicated — an egoist with, at the core of his character, that special kind of childishness which is an intrinsic part of egoism. Boots, in a sudden flash of intuition, saw him as one of those people who, graceful and graceless, move across life with the casual ruthlessness with which a child might stroll across a bed of flowers...

He said, slowly: 'All right. I won't butt in. But, mind you, if you don't play fair with Poppet, I'll — I'll ——'

'Shoot me,' Tarvin suggested, and smiled his rather charming smile.

A bell clanged suddenly above the soft swush of the waves. The people who had been meandering about the wharf were returning to the theater now: through the half-open doorway their voices sounded blurred, confused.

Tarvin tossed his cigarette stub into the sea. 'Polly's giving a stunning performance to-night, isn't she?' he observed. His voice was pleasantly casual. He might have been opening the conversation instead of closing it. After he had gone inside, Boots turned and walked farther up the wharf by himself. He stayed there for some time, standing motionless in the moonlight, staring at the incoming waves with troubled eyes. He felt baffled, helpless; and he didn't like the feeling...

They had, with a score of other people, gone back to Poppet's dressing-room to congratulate her on her performance; and now they were waiting in the corridor while she removed her make-up and changed her clothes.

Boots, after several minutes, gradually became aware that Henry seemed to be in an unusually perturbed state of mind.

'Anything wrong?' he inquired in a solicitous tone.

Henry took out his handkerchief, and mopped his brow. Then he put his handkerchief away again. He was breathing rather loudly.

'I wonder,' he said — 'I wonder, Boots, if you'd let me — well, I'd — if you don't mind, that is — I'd like to take Poppet back to her place. By myself, you know — if you wouldn't mind. I want to — well, talk to her. Just for a few minutes, you know.' He was extremely apologetic about the whole matter.

Boots said: 'Sure. That's all right.' And he thought: 'Oh, good Lord! Poor old Henry! He's going to propose to her!' The fact that he was going to propose to her stuck out of Henry in all directions, like the spines of a porcupine. It was unescapable. Boots felt genuinely distressed by it. He was fond of Henry. He even admired him. He wasn't, of course, particularly scintillating, or anything of that sort; and the interest that he took in International Complications and Universal Problems was both limited and labored. But, nevertheless, Henry was a good guy. When Hilda had accused him once of smugness, he, Boots, had said: 'That's all very well, but if everybody was like Henry there wouldn't be any international complications.' He had remained quite firm in his defense...

It was cool outside, and the moon was enormous and honey-colored across the glinting water. Poppet, buttoning her sweater over her thin dress, looked around:

'Where's Boots?' she asked.

'He had to go on ahead,' Henry began; then stopped short, conscience-stricken. 'I didn't mean to say that,' he confessed hurriedly. 'It sort of slipped out! What I meant to say was — I — well, I asked him to go on ahead. You don't mind, do you?'

She thrust her hands into her pockets. 'Oh, not at all,' she said briefly. 'Let's step homeward, shall we ——'

They walked down the wharf in silence. Along the shore the clutter of anchored boats were sheened with moonlight; behind them the buildings were nothing but squat chunks of shadow, thrown together formlessly, and checkered with innumerable bright windows.

Henry was breathing with such ardor now that he sounded rather like a dog after a heavy run. But Poppet scarcely heard him; she was scarcely conscious of his being there beside her, until, as they turned into the dark road that lay parallel with the sea, he said, suddenly and in a terrifically agitated voice:

'I want to ask you something, Poppet — I want to ask you if you'll — marry me!'

They went on walking for several moments; then she stopped short.

'That's awfully nice of you, Henry.'

He sounded clumsy, apologetic: 'I know I'm not clever, or anything, but I do — love you, Poppet. I've always loved you.'

She was glad they were hidden in the darkness, so that she didn't have to meet the poignant appeal of his eyes as well as of his voice. She said again: 'That's awfully nice of you, Henry. But I'm afraid — I'm sorry ——'

He seemed in an instant to sense and to accept her answer. 'That's all right,' he declared — hurriedly, reassuringly, as if she were the one who had been pained. 'That's all right, Poppet. I understand. I just thought I'd like — to tell you.'

They went on again, their feet sinking soundlessly into the sandy road. There was an opening between two of the buildings, and for half a dozen moments the moonlight flashed across them, white and blinding. From the corner of her eye Poppet could see that Henry's shoulders were hunched forward a little, that he was staring at the ground. He looked very young and defenseless and dejected. Then the darkness closed over them once more, and he was nothing but a shadow.

After a while he spoke to her again: 'Poppet ——'

'Yes?'

'You're not angry at my — saying what I did, are you?'

'Oh, of course not, Henry. Of course not!'

'It was silly of me,' he remarked. His voice was quiet now; all the excitement and hope had fallen out of it. 'I should have known,' he said. 'You're so beautiful — and clever — and everything; and I'm — I'm nothing. I can't do the sort of things you can, or Ricky. It was silly of me to ask you ——' He went stumbling on for several moments, as if he were wound up, as if he were determined to expose to her just how wide was the gulf that lay between them.

And, as she listened to him, Poppet felt a sudden and unreasoning sense of irritation. It was because of his simplicity, his humility: they stung her, they grated on her nerves until she found herself quivering all over.

'Oh, don't talk like that!' she said harshly. 'Don't *crawl*, Henry ——'

He stopped short, as if she had struck him; and for one instant she was possessed by an odd conviction. She felt sure, almost perfectly sure, that if Henry were to flare into a temper now, or if he were to seize her aggressively in his arms, she would accept him, she would say: 'Yes, Henry; yes, I will marry you.' And that would be the end of everything. It would be *done*. Definite.

But Henry didn't flare into a temper, and he didn't seize her in his arms. Instead he mumbled, 'I'm sorry, Poppet ——' And she knew that, hidden there beside her in the darkness, he was bewildered, and smarting painfully from the rough slap of her words...

6

The chief virtue of the Kiplings' car was that it made such a row, such a terrific row, that when you were in it you could sing at the top of your lungs and nobody but yourself was ever any the wiser. Robin always sang when she was driving — even downtown, in the heavy traffic. As a rule she concentrated on the 'Mikado' songs, or long, dramatic ballads about highwaymen. She sat up very straight, and opened her mouth wide. People often turned to look at her...

This morning she had been warbling for some time, with the greatest gusto. It was the first of September. It was extraordinarily beautiful. The sky was the color of delphiniums, with bright clouds whirling across it; and the trees appeared to be made of green-and-silver tin, flashing, rattling, shaking in the sharp wind from the sea; and the road in front of her was mottled with the flying shadows of the clouds, and patterned with the small leaping shadows of the metallic leaves; and far off, to the left, she could catch glimpses of the waves themselves, flame-blue, glittering and quivering in the floods of light.

She went roaring down the road, surrendering herself utterly to the loveliness of the morning. It was inconceivable that in all the world, in all life, there could be anything more beautiful than this moment — and now this one — and now this! Each, as it came to her, was flawless, was altogether perfect. She stopped singing about the Lord High Executioner, and began to chant: 'Everything is perfect — perfect ——' But suddenly, with a slight mental jolt, she remembered that it wasn't really perfect, not *quite*, because Denis wasn't here; and as soon as she had remembered this, it seemed as if the doors of her consciousness, which had been flung wide open to the sun and wind, shut themselves abruptly, closeting her thoughts with the vivid image of Denis Bayard...

She began to drive more slowly, aware — but not with the same sensitiveness and intensity — of the blowing trees, of the shadows, of the tall grass intermittently flattened by the wind into gleaming sheets of silver. The bright loveliness of the morning had remained unchanged; but, in a moment, her intimate relationship with it had been broken: it was no longer passing through her, dominating her, swaying her as the leaves were being swayed; instead, she was passing through it — Robin Kipling, with other things to claim her attention besides the blue glint of the sea, and sunshine, and clouds like white fire...

Her thoughts had gathered about Denis; they were moving over him, delicately, as soft as wings. What was he doing now? What was he thinking? Thinking — quite often when she was away from him like this, even, sometimes, when they were together, alone, she would find herself suddenly overwhelmed by an intense desire to know what he was thinking about. It was more than curiosity; it was an emotion deeper than that, and more indefinable — a longing, a painful eagerness, to be able to understand everything that concerned Denis, to be able to share in all the secret and intimate things of his mind and heart.

Once she had tried to talk to him about this; she had said, fumbling for the words: 'I feel as if I want to — *to pour myself* out to you, and to have you pour yourself out to me — everything — so that we'll know one another, Denis — all *through*, perfectly ——' Her heart had pounded while she was speaking; her voice had trembled a little because of that painful eagerness within her. But Denis had only quirked his eyebrows, and remarked: 'Good Lord! darling, wouldn't it be rather messy!' And when, stabbed with disappointment, she had turned away from him, he had drawn her back quickly, kissed her, ruffled his fingers through her hair, said, half-banteringly, half-apologetically: 'But I haven't got anything to pour out, Robin. Really I haven't! Except my passion for scalloped onions. Have I ever told you about my passion for scalloped onions? Bread crumbs on top, you know

— and butter — and browned very delicately in the oven ——' She had pressed her nose into his coat, screwing her eyes up tightly so that the tears, which felt like the points of small, hot needles, shouldn't be able to slide from under her lids and betray her. She had been conscious, not only of that sharp stab of disappointment, but of a sense of *humiliation*. 'Pour myself out to you — pour yourself out to me!' Why had she worded it like that? It sounded idiotic; it sounded — *funny!* And yet, all the time, she had had an odd, secret feeling that it had sounded neither idiotic nor funny to Denis: that he had known quite clearly what she had meant, and that, in dismissing it with so light a gesture, he had been, not misapprehending, but evading her appeal...

The thought struck her now, as it had on several other occasions, that there was something static in their relationship. It seemed to her that she and Denis were, in regard to understanding one another, in almost precisely the same position to-day as they had been that evening on the rocks. She was troubled by this; she had expected — she wasn't altogether sure what it was that she *had* expected; but something, some sort of developement — a richer intimacy, a more complete *rapprochement*. Why hadn't it come to them? She could feel the question closing in on her, dark and threatening; but she refused to submit to it; she thrust it away from her resolutely; she said: 'It will come. Of course. Later on it will come.'

Later on, when they were married ——

She found the corners of her mouth beginning to curl up. Mrs. Denis Bayard! She never said that name, never saw it written across her thought, without being seized with an involuntary and irrepressible desire to laugh. It was so astonishing: she, Robin, a married woman — with a ring on her finger, with, for the first time, experiences in which the rest of the Kiplings would have little or no share...

She swung the car into another road. There were maple woods on either side of it, full of wind and sunshine. She noticed that, here and there, the greenness was already being broken up by drifts of yellow — a light, delicate yellow that would soon be deepening and crimsoning, turning all these pale, fluttering leaves into flakes of fire. She leaned forward a little, resting her arms on the wheel. She began to count the months over to herself: September, October, November, December. Only four of them now! Denis had wanted it to be in the autumn, quite early; but she had felt that they ought to put it off a bit. There were going to be so many other things happening this autumn. Ricky's book would be coming out, and Mimsy would be returning home, and Boots would just be starting back to college; and, furthermore — since Marcia hadn't found any one to take her place yet, and she couldn't very well walk out and leave her in the lurch — there was the Tavern to be considered. 'Let's have it on New Year's Day,' she had suggested. Or, better still, there was New Year's Eve: 'At midnight, Denis, just as the chimes are striking!' She had thought that a rather beautiful idea: starting out together, with the whole year spread before them like an empty road. But Denis had looked as if he considered it, not exactly childish, but a trifle theatrical; so she had never mentioned it to him again...

A bell on a 'Beware' post was ringing. Ahead of her, glittering across the road like silver snakes, were two railway tracks; so she stopped the car with a jerk and sat up attentively. She could hear the train coming, although it was still hidden by the trees; now she could see its smoke spurting into the bright sky; now the engine itself was flashing past, its wheels roaring, its whistle shrilling in the wind. One of the engineers had leaned out and was waving to her, and she waved back quickly. She always did — ever since that time, years ago, when they had stood on a stone wall behind a field of poppies and waved to a half-magical individual who threw to them every evening a half-magical piece of coal. Now the baggage cars were in front of her. And now the passenger cars. These were the most fascinating: at every window there was a head — dozens and dozens of little portraits in separate frames. All kinds of portraits: people with or without hats, people talking to invisible persons on the other side of them, people reading, and sleeping, and staring passively at the scenery. She watched them, absorbed; and wondered — as she always wondered — who they all were. Where were they going? Why were they going? Every car was freighted with innumerable mysteries...

She went on sitting there beside the tracks, even after the bell had stopped clanging and stillness had flowed back over the woods. She lifted her head and took a deep sniff of the air. The old, rancid smell of train-smoke! She loved it; it reminded her of things — of ever so many things. All the stations that the Kiplings had once been in: the dirty waiting-rooms in which they had gone to sleep, with their carpet-bags for pillows and newspapers wrapped around their legs; the benches that had little ribs running across them — as if they had been made out of wooden corduroy; the crowded restaurants, where they had gulped down sausages, and buns that you could unwind into long, thin strips, and bluish-colored milk in chipped mugs. And it reminded her, almost more vividly than did anything else, of the Duke himself. She could see him coming across a platform, with no hat on, and carrying a bag of bananas under one arm. She could hear him saying, 'The Monmouth Special! Here we are! —' And then they would all tear towards the train, panting with excitement, and lugging their carpet-bags in both hands. And then there would be the usual squabble as to who should sit next to the windows — and then the bananas would be dealt out — and after a while Boots and Poppet would fall asleep on top of one another...

It occurred to her suddenly, with a slight jolt, that she had been sitting here for some time. She started the car again, and bumped across the silver tracks.

When Robin arrived at the grocery-store, she found that Poppet's plans had, within the last few hours, undergone an abrupt change. Instead of returning home the following day, she was going on a two weeks' cruise with several other members of the colony.

Her apologies for this last-minute arrangement were profuse and genuine: 'It's a shame to've brought you up here for nothing! I'm frightfully sorry, Robin! But I got the invitation only this morning — there wasn't even time to telegraph. And I didn't want to turn it down; it'll be such a — such a swell finale to the season. You do understand, don't you?'

Robin, perched on the window-sill, looked rather glum. They had been making big preparations for Poppet's return. They had ordered flowers for her room, and invited a lot of friends for a surprise party. It was too bad of these other people to snap her up like this! When she spoke, she sounded cross, disappointed: 'What about Clumington?' she wanted to know.

'He doesn't need me till the twentieth. So that's all right.'

'And there's Ricky's book ——'

'Oh, I'll be home for it! Of course!'

'Well, you'd better!'

Poppet was nettled. She observed tartly: 'I've just told you that I *would*, Robin!'

They were both conscious of a growing dissonance in the atmosphere.

Robin began to swing her foot back and forth, kicking the bureau. She asked, in a deliberate voice: 'Is Rand Tarvin going on the cruise?'

'Yes,' Poppet said.

And suddenly, for a moment, in one of those flashes of clairvoyance which are apt to come to members of a family, each of them was clearly and intensely aware of what the other was thinking. It was almost as if they were speaking; as if Robin were saying: 'Boots told me all about it. He told me that you love Rand Tarvin. What are you going to do, Poppet? What is going to happen?' — and as if Poppet were saying, in return: 'I know that you know; I know that you want me to explain the situation to you. But I can't talk about it, Robin. Please don't make me talk about it!' It was a moment so intimate, so vividly illuminated for both of them, that, had they been compelled to meet one another's eyes just then, they would have been acutely embarrassed. They sat there motionless, pretending — although it was a hollow pretense — to watch a flock of gulls that were flashing down the sky on silver wings; then Robin suddenly leaned forward a little, suddenly reached across the silence:

'Look here,' she said, 'look here, Poppet! — isn't there — can't I *help?* Isn't there anything I can *do?*'

Poppet went on staring at the birds. She shook her head; she said, simply, 'Thank you, but I guess not, Robin. It'll — it'll be all right. Somehow ——'

And because the Kiplings, as far back as she could remember, had always been able to butt into one another's business as casually as they butted into one another's rooms, this new and inflexible reticence on Poppet's part baffled Robin, sharpened her curiosity to anxiety, left her with a shut-out feeling that she had often experienced with Ricky, but seldom with any other member of the family. It was as if an invisible door had been closed and bolted; it was as if Poppet, standing here beside the window, were, in reality, infinitely far away from her, were locked in a mysterious citadel of reserve that she, Robin, had neither the power nor the impudence to storm...

They went out for lunch a little later, and it seemed to her that Poppet had never been more charming or sparkling. Half the people in the tea-house collected about their table. They laughed uproariously at her antics; and Bren said: 'Thank God, you've cheered up again!' and Bill Hackett nodded approvingly at Robin, and said: 'You've done her good! She's been perfectly dismal this last week ——' And Poppet went on entertaining them with unflagging spirits.

Only once during the afternoon her gayety wavered. It was when Robin, talking with some one else, happened to mention something about the surprise party they had planned for her at home.

Poppet turned round quickly. 'A surprise party?'

Robin nodded.

'Why, that was awfully nice of you!' She looked pleased for a moment; then suddenly concerned.

'And Ricky and Boots are getting a lot of flowers for your room, and Mrs. Bird is making a cake ——'

Poppet said: 'Oh, I *am* sorry!' She sounded genuinely distressed. 'You will explain to them, won't you, Robbie? Tell them how much I appreciate it! Thank them — do thank them, won't you?'

Then she was reclaimed by the people all about her, snatched back by them into a mood of scintillant vivacity...

7

Ricky opened his eyes slowly. The room seemed to quiver about him, blurred, nebulous, as if it were fashioned from shadow-stuff. He was aware, but in a passive and uncomprehending manner, of the sound of the wind outside, of the sound of great sheets of rain being slapped against the pavements; then, gradually, as the clouds of sleep lifted, he became possessed by a vague feeling that there was something different, something especially significant, about this particular morning. What was it? His thoughts began to stir themselves. It was as if, summoned after a night's encampment, they were rising up, stretching, moving languidly and gropingly in search of the key to this mysterious sense of expectancy. Why was there something different about this morning? He lay there motionless, struggling for several moments to perceive the reason. Then, suddenly, it flashed out — bright and solid among the dim, floating shapes with which his waking consciousness was peopled. Of course! Today — his book!

He said the words over, very softly, very deliberately: 'Today my book is going to be published!' Then he waited — waited for the dramatic and overwhelming surge of emotion which he had always supposed this occasion would bring to him. But it didn't come. Not even a semblance of it came. There was, instead, merely a mild sense of achievement, a faint flare of gratification. It was extremely disappointing. He told himself, trying to whip up a show of that anticipated ecstasy: 'This is what you have been looking forward to, for years and years. Remember how you used to plan for it, how you used to lie awake at night and dream of it. Remember — remember ——' He closed his eyes tightly, and tried to thrust himself back through the shadowy corridors of the past. Ricky — making up pieces — in attics — in the Lovely Summer — in the painted basement across the park; Ricky, making up pieces, and trembling with excitement at the thought of one day, one day ——

To-day!

He opened his eyes again.

Where was it — that splendid joy, that fierce flame of triumph which he had expected to leap through him?

In a little while now the city would be awake. The bookshops would open. Clerks would unwrap small (very small, probably) packages, and stack a few thin green volumes among hundreds of others. They would handle them briskly, efficiently. They would note: 'Sword Across the Stars,' by Richard Kipling. Richard Kipling. A new poet. Another new poet. Then people would come in. Some of them — presumably — would pick his book up and examine it. They would glance through the jacket blurb; they would flip the pages back and forth, diving into a sonnet, nibbling at something here and something else there. Perhaps they would be interested; perhaps they would buy it...

He suddenly got up. He went over to the desk and drew a book out of the bottom drawer. He opened it — slowly, curiously. The pages looked very white; the letters looked very neat and rigid and impersonal. He read several of the poems, and they seemed, somehow, different from the poems which had been scribbled in his notebook. They seemed cool, aloof — little black patterns on expensive paper.

He felt, all at once, unhappy. He felt as if something beautiful had gone out, not only of his work, but of himself as well. Something beautiful, shining, nameless. He wondered if it was lost irretrievably. He wondered, suddenly, in a spasm of blind fear, if he would ever be able to write anything again.

He sat there motionless, staring into the storm.

Perhaps, however hard, however desperately he tried...

He brooded over the thought. And gradually, almost imperceptibly, his emotions became tangible, became objectified, began to shape themselves into words, into arresting phrases. He leaned forward a little, his eyes growing dark and intent. His mood was being subjected to a subtle change: he felt now not so much distressed as absorbed in his distress.

His lips began to form the words, soundlessly.

Words! Words telling of his fear that words would never come to him again...

His fingers, as if moving of their own accord, reached across the desk, closed round a pencil that was lying there. He commenced to draw little latticed squares on the blotter, little lop-sided circles on the edge of a pad. He leaned forward still farther. He was oblivious of the rain being flung against the window. He had forgotten his book.

It was happening! Mysteriously, irresistibly, it was happening — just as it had happened innumerable times before. He was being seized with the old excitement, with the old anguish and rapture.

He began to write.

Later on, when Robin and Boots burst into the room, he was still hunched over the desk. There were several torn sheets of paper on the floor; there was a new poem in his notebook.

Poppet appeared upon the scene while they were having breakfast.

The taxi-driver, at her request, tooted his horn half a dozen times to announce her arrival; and she shot out of the car arrayed in a scarlet rubber coat and carrying a variety of packages, an enormous bunch of red roses, and a small pailful of clams. Upstairs in the apartment she dropped everything on the floor with a bang and flung herself, wet but exuberant, upon Ricky. Then, whirling round again, she swept up the packages and roses and showered them into his lap. 'They're for you!' she informed him beamingly. 'They're presents ——' A gold fountain-pen, and an etching of ships in moonlight, and three books, and a mammoth box of chocolates, and four pairs of socks several sizes too large for the hero's feet.

Everybody was charmed...

After breakfast they stacked the dishes in the sink, and, donning raincoats and old hats, sallied forth into the city. It was still wet out, and windy. In the park the air was full of falling leaves. They matted the deserted paths; they were plastered against the swan-boats, and were floating in brown and yellow drifts on the crumpled surface of the pond. It was a madcap morning — pungent, clamorous, alive with spirited movement.

The Kiplings, with their arms linked together, tramped jauntily under the trees. The rain was flashing in their faces; the leaves were swirling all about them. Robin said: 'Oh, if only Mimsy was here ——' That was the one flaw. Mimsy ought to be here — she *ought* to be! She had promised, right along, to return home in time for the book; then, in her last letter, had come the news that the Widdernesses were intending to remain in London for another twelve days. It was because of something-or-other to do with the nephew. It was totally unexpected. She was sorry, she was most dreadfully sorry; she did hope they would understand, would realize...

They passed the pond; then the drenched lilac-bushes; then the bandstand with its benches crowded with a horde of pompous and agitated pigeons. Now the tall iron gates were gleaming ahead of them. Now they were out again in the streets.

When they came to the first bookshop, Ricky halted.

'I'm going to wait outside,' he announced.

'Oh, no ——' the others began protesting immediately.

'But somebody might *guess!*' he explained, and pulled his collar up and slouched his hat over his eyes and stared resolutely into the window. He was excited enough now. His heart felt as if it were bouncing about inside of him like a rubber ball. 'My book is published! Here — in front of me — in this very store — there are copies of my book!' Wonderful! Thrilling! And yet, at the same time, deep within himself, he was conscious that there was something a little gaudy, a little cheap, about this excitement compared with the quiet, intense joy he had experienced earlier in the morning when he had written his new poem...

In the shop Robin and Poppet and Boots were charging a portly clerk with *pince-nez.*

'How do you do!' Robin said warmly, as if he were a bosom friend. 'We want two copies of "Sword Across the Stars" by Richard Kipling.'

The clerk repeated the title in a vague voice. 'Is it fiction?'

'Oh, no!' they chorused. '*Poetry!*'

He looked somewhat dubious; so Poppet explained:

'It's very recent — it just came out this morning.'

While he went off to make inquiries, they stood in the middle of the aisle in a dripping group; and when he returned, bearing several thin, green volumes under his arm, they breathed loudly with relief.

'— Three, four, five, six,' Boots counted rapidly. 'That isn't all you've ordered, is it?'

The clerk attempted to say something about its being a first book, and, in consequence, not expecting much call for it; but the Kiplings landed on him quickly and severely:

'You'll need dozens more than that, of course! Everybody knows it's going to be a tremendous success ——'

And Poppet recited glibly: 'This young poet has a brilliant future ahead of him. His work is cool, sensitive, restrained; it is sharp-edged with beauty. His feeling for rhymes ——'

'For words,' Boots corrected. 'And we *know* him!'

'Know whom, sir?' asked the clerk, slightly confused.

'The author!'

'Oh, really.'

'He's our oldest friend!' Robin contributed with a flourish; and Poppet, opening one of the books with an air of deep interest, exclaimed: 'Dear me! Isn't this nice! He's dedicated it to his family. We know his family,' she informed the clerk brightly. 'Such charming people! Twelve of them. And all girls ——'

They dashed out into the rain again, and swept Ricky on to the next shop on their list; but here, also, the salesman had never heard of 'Sword Across the Stars,' and reported, after making inquiries, that none had been ordered.

'None!' they repeated blankly.

And Poppet said: 'For three generations our entire family has traded with this concern, but in the future we shall feel obliged to deal elsewhere ——' and marched out of the place with an air of crushing hauteur.

After that they encountered a chatty little person bubbling over with piquant information:

'"Sword Across the Stars?" Ah, certainly! A local poet, you know, madam.'

'You don't say!' they breathed, properly impressed.

'And a very young man — associated with Meredith, Poynter.'

'Meredith, Poynter?'

'The publishers, you know.'

'Oh, yes, of course.'

'And a nephew of Rudyard Kipling, I understand!'

'Good gracious!' Robin said. 'Fancy that!'

'And everybody,' Poppet rattled off, 'feels that he has such a brilliant future ahead of him, *don't* they! His work is so cool, sensitive, restrained; it is sharp-edged with beauty. And his feeling for rhymes ——'

'For words,' Boots corrected...

At the next shop they were waited upon by an oily-haired young clerk who looked both earnest and gullible. While he was wrapping the books, Poppet touched his sleeve with her fingers: 'Please,' she murmured, widening her eyes and speaking with a delectable lisp, '*do* sell a lot of these, won't you? Please, won't you! Because I' — she blinked up at him coyly — 'You see, I'm engaged to Mr. Kipling!'

'Oh! are you?'

'Yes!' she beamed. 'Isn't it beautiful!'

'And do you write, too?' he inquired, all interest and deference.

'Oh — *prolifically!*'

'What — what name?' he ventured.

'Oscar,' Poppet said gently.

'Oscar ——'

'It's a *nom de plume*,' she explained. 'My name isn't *really* Oscar.'

'But — Oscar what?'

'*Just* Oscar.'

'Oh!' he gaped at her, worried and suspicious...

So they went through the morning, buying books lavishly and deluging the various salespeople with reckless and picturesque misinformation. Robin was introduced, in rapid succession, as Ricky's wife, aunt, and niece; and Poppet gabbled off her little quotation with unflagging sprightliness; and Boots urged, almost commanded, every one to order more copies of the book, insinuating that he was personally in touch with vast hordes of individuals who would soon be desiring it. When they had dashed through the last shop on their list, they had lunch — standing up at a wooden counter in the company of street-car conductors and several officers of the law. They had frankfurters, and root beer, and huge round buns that left mustaches of sugar over their mouths. And Boots, slapping mustard on his roll, declared, 'This beats the Tavern any old day!' and promptly became involved in a passionate discussion with a somewhat battered-looking gentleman of indeterminate race, but of most pronounced views on the subject of a future Anglo-American war. And Poppet, with her mouth full, asked the policemen if they controlled traffic, or merely strutted about looking ominous. And Ricky prodded her, and whispered: 'Do ask them *why* they're policemen: necessity, inclination — or does it run in the family?' And Robin, because of a declining appetite, shared her second bun with a flattered conductor...

When they entered the park again, the wind had fallen, and the rain was little more than a soft, slanting mist. They walked leisurely down the paths, and out the iron gates at the other end; then across the avenue, and through a narrow side street to Mrs. McMasters's house.

Lunch was just over. There was a savory smell of food in the hall. In the reception-room a number of people were lounging about on the heterogeneous collection of chairs — reading newspapers, and discussing the weather, and the radio, and Lindbergh, and a recent operation or two. Farther along, in the dining-room, a stout girl, with high-arched eyebrows which gave her a perpetual expression of blank astonishment, was clearing the glasses off the tables. The Kiplings greeted her briefly, and hurried out into the kitchen where Mrs. Bird flung herself upon their necks with an overpowering odor of bacon.

'Look!' they chorused. 'Ricky's book!' and presented her with a copy.

She held it very carefully in her greasy hands.

'Say! that's swell!' she declared. 'Has it got any pictures?'

No, it hadn't any pictures.

'Well, never mind,' she consoled. 'It's got a swell-looking cover.'

Mrs. Bird was intensely proud of, but not in the slightest degree awe-struck by, the Kiplings' achievements. She always bought the magazines in which Ricky's poems appeared; and clipped out of the papers (along with her murder trials) notes of social events in which Mimsy's name was mentioned. And from time to time she blew herself to a dinner at the Tavern, where she chatted breezily about

Robin to waitresses and table-companions; or turned up — plumed hat and all — at Clumington's theater, where, during the intermissions, she entertained every one for seats around with elaborate, and occasionally fictitious, anecdotes of Poppet's early youth...

Out in the hall again they encountered Miss Pansy Allen Samp — somewhat withered now and parched-looking, but still dressed very girlishly and more painfully vivacious than ever. They bestowed one of Ricky's books upon her; and she almost wept with gratitude. 'I shall treasure it always!' she told them. And she would! She would say:

'Oh, yes! It was given to me by the author. Richard Kipling, you know. We've been friends for years and years. Haven't you ever met him here? Haven't you, really? He's terribly handsome! See — this is his picture. It's just out of a newspaper, of course, and it doesn't do him anywhere *near* justice. I wish I could find the photograph he gave me — I must have mislaid it somewhere. His eyes are —— Oh, you *naughty* girl! You mustn't look at the first page! No, I won't *let* you! He wrote something on it for me — you know, sort of — well — *private!* He'd be terribly upset if I let anybody else read it! You won't think —— Now, Emma, of *course* not! I never heard of such a thing! We're just terribly good friends — or, that is — I *hope* — well, you know how it is, dear! I don't mind speaking to you. These artistic men — sometimes, in an older woman — you know, they feel we can *understand* ——'

The Kiplings chatted to her for several moments. They sounded hurried, uncomfortable. There was something so blatantly tragic about Miss Pansy Allen Samp that, whenever they were caught alone with her like this, they always felt acutely embarrassed. It was as if they were being forced to witness an indecent revelation. They avoided meeting the naked eagerness in her eyes; they backed away fastidiously from her grasping and imploring hands...

Farther along the hall, in the last room, they descended upon Mrs. McMasters. That lady was ensconced in a dilapidated *chaise-longue*, sucking a lollipop and reading a luridly bound detective magazine.

She said: 'Hello! What's up now?'

'Don't be so calm!' Poppet reproved. 'Emote! Palpitate! Turn livid with excitement!' She sat down on the edge of the *chaise-longue* and gave one of Mrs. McMasters's massive legs a resounding whack. 'Here's Ricky's book! Hurray! And here's me! Hurray again! What more could you want for a celebration?'

Mrs. McMasters observed: 'You've got egg on your chin.'

'Mustard,' Poppet corrected, and wiped it off with a flourish.

They handed her — proudly, because the occasion represented an achievement which she could appreciate more thoroughly than anybody else in the world — one of the slim volumes.

'There!' they said.

She looked it over. 'Pretty good,' she commented.

'Ah, go on!' Robin urged. 'Don't be such a *scrimp* ——'

She was silent for several moments, her shrewd glance passing from one to the other. The Kiplings — the children of the painted basement! How many years ago was it? Robin coming into this room, short, sturdy, with eyes like blue fire; Robin saying, 'Give us a chance, and we'll show you — we'll show you ——' The rest of them waiting outside on the pavement with their bags and bundles: Ricky, very thin and proud; and Mimsy; and tousle-haired Poppet; and Boots, a fat, blond little boy with a solemn face...

Mrs. McMasters suddenly grinned at them.

'All right,' she acknowledged. 'I guess you've done it!'

They beamed back, glowing, triumphant...

After they had invited her to have dinner with them that evening, they began buttoning their raincoats again.

'At half-past five,' Robin repeated.

'And do wear your jewelry, won't you?' Poppet requested. 'I love to hear it clank.'

'Oh, I'll doll up,' Mrs. McMasters promised. Her eyes held Poppet's for an instant. 'Have a nice summer?'

'Mm! Grand!' She jerked her hat down, then thrust her hands into the pockets of her scarlet coat. She looked spirited, debonair.

Boots, standing near the door with Robin, was watching her. He remarked, in a low voice: 'I guess she's got over Rand Tarvin all right.' He felt tremendously relieved...

Just as they were leaving the room, Mrs. McMasters called Ricky back.

'You don't have to,' she said, 'but if you want to put something in the book ——'

He whipped his pen out quickly, then hesitated. 'I can't think of anything clever,' he apologized. He knelt down beside the *chaise-longue* and wrote: 'With love to Mrs. Mac.'

She read it, a little greedily under a show of casual interest.

'Love!' she scoffed.

'Oh, very well,' he said cheerfully. 'You can scratch it out.'

But she didn't scratch it out.

8

The Kiplings' living-room was three steps below the level of the rest of the apartment — an eccentricity which cost them an extra three hundred dollars a year, and occasioned, from time to time, dramatic falls on the part of guests unprepared for the drop. It was a large, vivid, disorderly room. Crowded bookshelves, and fat shabby chairs drawn round the fireplace; a sagging couch, mounded with striped cushions; magazines stacked on the floor; a ship model on the mantel, with guns and portholes and billowing sails; several pieces of rather gaudy-colored tapestry; bright-patterned rugs; good prints, an old picture of knights cantering through a forest, and another one of a group of Roundheads questioning a proud little boy in a satin suit; logs piled on the hearth; sprays of red leaves stuck in milk bottles; candlesticks clotted with green wax; newspapers, maps, and above the desk an immense black-and-crimson poster with 'Come to Scotland' blazoned across it...

The afternoon had cleared brilliantly, but it was still cold.

Poppet built a fire in the grate. Then she pulled one of the striped cushions off the couch and squatted on it beside the hearth. The wads of paper flamed up; the smell of burning wood began to uncurl itself on the chill air. Firelight and sunlight in the room, and the wind outside, and bright leaves spinning in the wind.

Poppet was very still. Only her eyes were alive — vividly, vehemently alive. In them all the feverish emotion which lay under her quietness seemed to have found concentrated expression. Inside, her heart was hammering back and forth, back and forth. She tried to control it, to ignore it. She thought: 'Oh, hell! why can't I be calm about the thing!' She must be calm. It was ridiculous to keep on falling prey like this to a storm of excitement. Excitement — that was what it was! Not fear, not even joy; but overwhelming excitement, such as she used to experience on Christmas Eve, or on the night before a birthday...

A door opened; and she straightened herself with a slight jerk.

Ricky wandered into the room. He had been asleep for the last hour or so and looked a trifle dazed, with his hair on end.

'Hello,' he said. 'Where's everybody?'

She sounded casual: 'Denis is in the bathroom, I guess, and Boots and Hilda've gone to get some more grub, and Robin's dressing.'

He came and squatted down beside her on the floor. 'Nice fire.'

'Mm. Isn't it.'

He held his hands out, and stared musingly between his fingers at the blazing logs.

She was tense for a moment. It seemed astonishing, almost incredible, that, sitting close to her like this, he shouldn't be arrested by the sound of her heart. Surely he would prick his ears up; surely he would ask: 'What's that? That hammering noise?' She waited for him to say something; but he was silent. He was absorbed in his own thoughts. He was feeling, as he always felt upon waking from an afternoon's sleep, strangely and indefinably out of touch with everything about him. It was a peculiar sensation. It was, he reflected, as if the rhythm of the day had been broken — or, rather, as if his relationship with it had been broken. That was it. The day had gone on ahead of him. He was behind it, out of step with it. Everything jarred on him subtly...

Poppet leaned forward a little. She thought: 'Shall I tell him — now — quickly — before Denis comes in?' Should she? Should she? She began to tremble with agitation; then, as abruptly as she had conceived the idea, she abandoned it. Of course not! This was Ricky's day. Every hour of it belonged to him. She had no right, no desire, to intrude upon it.

She felt a sudden sense of remorse for not having been able to give herself, with her whole heart, to this day of his; she felt as if she ought to apologize to him because, all the time, even in the morning when they had gone gallivanting around the city, she had been possessed by a fierce, secret excitement which had nothing whatever to do with his book.

It occurred to her that perhaps he was aware of this, perhaps he *felt* it.

She was distressed by the thought. She suddenly turned to him and said: 'Ricky, I *am* glad about your book! You know that, don't you? I'm terribly glad ——' Then, in a sort of foolish panic, she got up, made for her room, pell-mell, and locked the door after her. She sat on the end of the bed for several minutes, breathing hard. 'Idiot!' she ground out softly. 'You damned idiot!' She felt furious with herself...

Her trunk, which had arrived earlier in the afternoon, was standing near the window. She got up again, opened it, and began sorting the contents — pulling things out with a jerk, then repacking most of them and flinging the others on the floor. It was a relief to be active. She worked vigorously, almost violently, her mouth taut and her cheeks scorching. When the trunk was finished with, she delved into the closet. Her tan suit — she would want that, of course; and this dress, and this one. She hesitated for a moment in front of a corn-colored crêpe. Perhaps —— Oh, she might as well take it along. Better have too much than too little! And a hat — she'd need another hat. There was a black one somewhere — small, just the thing for traveling. Where was it? She rummaged through the bureau drawers; she dragged a chair over to the closet, stood on it, and began searching the shelves. The hat wasn't there; but she noticed a suède belt that belonged to the tan suit. She whipped it from under several cardboard boxes, and, in doing so, upset one of them. It fell with a thud, spilling its contents on the floor. She swore under her breath; then stepped down again, backwards. Her foot crunched on something. The wire and tinsel of a pair of fairy's wings. She kicked them out of her way impatiently, and went back to the trunk...

When she returned to the living-room, Henry was lounging in front of the fire with Ricky and Denis. He stood up as she came in; but she intercepted his greeting, lightly, with a defensive nonchalance: 'Hello,' she said. 'What a charming group! Young Men at Ease ——' Sauntering towards them, she was aware that Henry had reddened a little; she was aware, instinctively, that he had been nerving himself for this moment. No doubt he had resolved to be quite casual, perfectly poised; probably he had lain awake most of the night planning what he would say to her. And now she had deliberately confused him. He was helpless; and, meeting his eyes for an instant, she found herself, with an incomprehensible maliciousness, striking at his helplessness. 'Henry's blushing,' she observed, 'because the last time he saw me he proposed to me, and I turned him down, and he isn't sure how it's proper for him to behave now. Are you, Henry?' He flinched a bit; and she thought, savagely: 'Oh, shut up! What's the matter with you?' It was cheap, ugly, venting her excitement in this sort of thing...

Robin appeared soon afterwards — with a slight flourish, because she was wearing a new dress in honor of the occasion.

Everybody looked somewhat startled.

'My dear!' Denis led the comments. 'What an outfit!'

She stopped short. 'Is it?' She was frankly crestfallen. 'I wasn't sure if it was gaudy or artistic. I never seem to be able to tell.'

'That,' Poppet explained, 'is because you haven't any taste. I haven't either. None of us has — except Mimsy. It's very distressing!'

'And I thought I looked so nice,' Robin mourned.

'You do,' Ricky comforted. 'After the first shock it's quite picturesque. But your shoulder-straps are showing.'

'Which side?'

'Both.'

'And there's something the matter with your mouth,' Poppet discovered. 'Come hither, my child.'

Robin squatted down in front of her.

'Did you use my lip-stick?'

'Yes'm.'

'Well, don't yum it all off — it's expensive.' She leaned forward and wiped away some of the red stuff with her finger-tip. She was conscious, without glancing up, that Henry was watching her. She knew just how his eyes were looking. Pained — puzzled. She had hurt him, of course. Well — what of it? Why not? Perhaps it was the best thing she could have done. Perhaps if you hurt people they stopped loving you. Certainly there was no use in Henry's loving her now. It was a — waste. Like pouring something through a sieve...

Ricky was watching her, too. Several moments ago he had been arrested by a certain odd tensity which seemed to protrude through her nonchalance like bones protruding through a thin skin. He had started to wonder about it; but his eyes had suddenly been caught by the silver glitter of her ear-rings. When she moved they swung against her neck, delicately: now the green stones in them were dark, dull; now, as the firelight touched them, they were extraordinarily vivid — the color of — of what? Where else had he seen that rich, flashing green? He tried to remember: wet leaves, waves, pools under willows — no, deeper — *deeper!* His thoughts began to fly off, searching among all the lovely green things he had ever known. Then, abruptly, he stopped them. He mustn't let them do this! It was becoming an insidious habit. So often (only lately he had grown aware of *how* often) when he started to think earnestly about something, to reason with himself — to grapple, for instance, with some intellectual or ethical problem — his whole attention would be swerved aside quite suddenly by an irrelevant bit of loveliness. The soft clamor of wind in trees, leaf-shadows on his desk, clouds, a bird — the silver glitter of a pair of ear-rings. He must be careful of this — careful! Beauty too easily seduced him...

He refocused his thoughts on Poppet. What was it that he had been thinking about? Something in her manner, something unusual...

Poppet, glancing up, saw his eyes fastened speculatively on her face. She looked away again quickly. Probably he was wondering why she had rushed into her room in that idiotic fashion. He might even have sensed — guessed ——

She suddenly jumped to her feet, dropping her careful nonchalance for a brittle vivacity. 'Come on!' she said. 'Let's do something! Let's dance ——' She snatched up one of the records that were piled untidily on the floor, and started the phonograph. 'Come on, Denis! Save me from Henry! He always breathes in my ear ——' But there was a sudden conflicting flare of music from outside, march-music; and she turned the phonograph off again, dashed to a window, and flung herself halfway through it: 'Hey!' she yelled. 'Hello, Tony! How are you?' Down on the pavement an accordion-man lifted his hat to her, and bowed and beamed. 'Play "William Tell,"' she commanded; and the 'Marseillaise,' and 'Behold the Lord High Executioner' — which the Kiplings had personally taught him one afternoon in the park — and something from 'Carmen,' and something else from 'Faust,' and a just recognizable version of 'The Volga Boatman'...

Robin came and hung over the window-sill with her. She applauded the familiar repertoire with great gusto; then backed into the room again.

'Anybody got any money?' she inquired.

Ricky stood up to consult the chipped teapot on the mantel; but Henry had already pulled several coins out of his pocket.

'And a book!' Poppet suggested. 'Let's give him one of the books ——' She whirled round, whipped a green volume off the table, then returned to the window. 'Hey, Tony! *Tony!* Catch! A present for you!' She dropped it. There was a thud below, accompanied by a sharp yelp of surprise. She thrust her head out still farther. 'Golly!' she reported, 'I've hit some one!' She began shouting apologies: 'I say, mister! sorry — *enormously* sorry ——'

Ricky had turned the teapot upside down. 'Look here,' he said. 'We must have been robbed. There was a lot of money in this yesterday.'

'Well, it won't do any good to get nasty about it,' Poppet observed in an amiable voice. 'I didn't mean to hit you! I'll never hit you again! Cross m'heart ——'

Robin wandered back to the fire. 'Oh, that's all right,' she assured Ricky. 'I spent it. I bought a harp.'

'A what?'

'A harp.'

'Good Lord! what for?'

'To play, of course.' She seated herself on the arm of Denis's chair and swung her legs. 'I was passing Steinman's, and it was in the window, so I went in and got it. It's a little one — gilt — and there's a gilt stool to go with it. And it sounds beautiful — wait till you hear it! You just have to stroke your fingers across it, and it sounds beautiful ——'

She was very pleased with her harp. After Christmas she was going to commence taking lessons on it. She would have time for them then: she would have time for all sorts of things then. A month or so ago, when it had first dawned upon her that Denis would strenuously object to her holding a position at the Tavern (or anywhere else) after they were married, she had been somewhat nonplussed. What on earth would she do with herself all day? She had never possessed so much leisure; she wasn't prepared for it. But the problem was quite settled now; and she was looking forward eagerly, almost excitedly, to the empty hours stretching ahead of her. She was going to learn to speak French and to play golf; and she was going to study the pictures in the Art Museum, and attend current-events lectures, and read quantities of important books, and pore over maps so that she would know where places were. And, lastly, she was going to have lessons on the harp.

She could see herself, sitting on the little gilt stool, in the twilight, playing softly to Denis. And singing, perhaps. Singing — there was another thought! She might take singing lessons as well...

She got up again after a few minutes, and started across the room towards the kitchen. Denis followed her with his eyes.

'Really,' he observed, 'you ought to have a hand-organ and a monkey to go with that dress.'

She paused, half-amused, half-troubled. 'I wonder why I always admire the wrong things?'

'Thank you!'

She wrinkled her nose at him. 'And there's a hat, too! I may as well make a full confession. It's red, darling! And it's got things on it, and they *glitter!*'

'Can't you keep it for Christmas,' he suggested. 'To hang in a window?'

She laughed, and said: 'But I love it! It looks like a circus!' She held her hand out to him: 'If you'll come and help me get dinner, though, I'll promise not to wear it very often. I'll just put it on now and then, and creep through the back door, and go for secret walks in it ——'

The kitchen was, as usual, in a decidedly chaotic condition.

Robin pulled a bag of potatoes out of the broom-closet, and plumped them down on the draining-board. 'There!' she said.

Denis was prodding something, a charred object in the sink. 'What is it?' he wanted to know.

She turned round. 'That? Oh — a pie. Or it started out as a pie rather. Such a sumptuous one! I forget what happened. I think I washed my hair.'

'You're a nice sort of housekeeper!' he scoffed. 'I suppose our meals will consist of little mounds of ashes, with labels attached.'

She made a rueful grimace. 'It does look like it, doesn't it!' She dragged a stool over to the table, sat down, and began shelling peas into a tin saucepan. 'I expect we'd better try to find an apartment on top of a restaurant.'

'But, my dear Miss Kipling, I don't want to have anything to do with restaurants! I'm fed up with them!'

'Are you? Then we'll have to get Mimsy to come and make us things. She's very accomplished.'

He threw a handful of peelings into the colander. 'Perhaps,' he suggested, 'Mimsy won't approve of me.'

'Oh, she has excellent taste!'

'Is that a compliment or a warning?'

She glanced up, smiling at him. She thought, quickly: 'Doesn't he look nice — with his hair rumpled like that!' She became capriciously absorbed in his hair. She stopped shelling the peas, and sat motionless. Dark and thick, and warm at the roots! She wanted to touch it, to run her fingers through it. His hair was beautiful: everything about him was beautiful to her — the casual grace of his pose, his hands, his profile set against the window and the reddened sky. She felt, all at once, a passionate desire to kiss Denis, to tell him how much she loved him. Over and over again: 'I love you, Denis — I love you — I love you ——'

Her hands seemed to grow suddenly weak, so that the pods she was holding slipped from them into her lap. She seemed to be growing weak all over — languorous — and yet, at the same time, hot and ardent. Denis — Denis —— Why didn't he look at her? Couldn't he feel her calling to him? Couldn't he feel her love all about him — all about him ——

Denis, reaching for another potato, dropped his knife.

She sprang to her feet, quickly, eagerly, and picked it up for him.

Poppet, placing forks round the table, glanced at her watch. 'Boots and Hilda,' she observed, 'must be trying to convert the butcher to Socialism. They've been gone for hours.' Henry emerged from the kitchen with a stack of dishes. Ricky put another log on the fire — and stood motionless for a moment, watching the pale bark turn pink, then shrivel into flames. The firelight was growing brighter now as the sunlight faded. It flickered warmly against the white cloth on the table, and glinted against the amber-colored glasses which Boots's Japanese friends, in one of their irrepressible flares of generosity, had presented to the household...

Robin called out: 'You'd better set an extra place, I think, in case Marcia comes ——'

Henry returned to the kitchen for more dishes.

There was a rap on the front door.

Poppet crossed the living-room, opened it, and said hello to a sprightly looking young man accompanied by a vacuum cleaner.

'How do you do, madam,' he leaned towards her, vivaciously confidential. 'My name is Pance. L. M. Pance. I represent the Accordio Vacuum Company, and I am here to demonstrate to you the marvelous advantages of this cleaner. Millions of happy housewives have already endorsed it. Millions more will soon be doing so. We want *you* to be one of them, madam. We want to give you the benefit of our special ——'

Poppet turned round. 'Hey, Robin! Want to buy a vacuum cleaner?'

'A what?'

'Vacuum cleaner.'

'I don't know. How much is it?'

'How much is it?' she asked the young man.

'Sixty-seven dollars, madam. But we are offering you a special ——'

'Sixty-seven dollars,' Poppet relayed.

'Nope,' Robin decided. 'We haven't got that much money.'

'We haven't got that much money,' Poppet repeated. 'We've just bought a harp, you see. Awfully sorry.'

'Oh, but' — the young man was eager, joyous — 'I am offering it to you on our special terms, madam. Only fifteen dollars down! That's all! Not a penny more. And five dollars a month till it's paid for. Five dollars a month — think of it, madam! Will you ever notice it! Of course you won't! Nobody would! Five dollars! Why, it's only a dollar-twenty-five a week! It's only eighteen cents a day! Think of that, madam! Eighteen cents!' He seemed quite overcome by the thought. 'What is eighteen cents?' he demanded. 'It's absurd! And yet for eighteen cents a day you can be the proud possessor of this beautiful cleaner, without which no modern home is truly modern. Millions of happy housewives ——' He swerved aside quickly: 'You will be amazed,' he declared, 'astonished, at the work it will do for you! If you could only see — if you would only permit me to demonstrate ——'

'Sure,' Poppet said casually.

The young man pranced into the room and attached his cord to a floor-plug. He touched something with his foot:

'Now, then!' he was both sparkling and impressive. 'I would like you to look at this rug, madam; I would like you to watch ——'

Poppet interrupted him: 'Would you mind doing this one?' she requested. 'It's dirtier.'

He swung round obligingly. 'Now, then!' he began again. 'I would like you to look at this rug; I would like you to watch —— *There!* See! Isn't it remarkable? See how the colors have been brought out! See the difference between what I've cleaned and what I haven't!'

'Mm! Slick!' she acknowledged. 'But would you mind finishing it? It looks rather silly like that.' And after he had vacuumed the other half, she called out: 'Hey, Robin, we'd better get one of these things.'

After a moment or two Robin emerged from the kitchen — a knife in one hand, an onion in the other, and tears streaming down her cheeks.

'She's just lost her husband,' Poppet explained to Mr. Pance. 'Look here, old dear, can't we rake up fifteen dollars for a first payment?'

Robin was doubtful. She deposited the knife and onion on the desk, and began rummaging through the pockets of the various coats which were strewn round the room. Henry presented several bills to her; Denis announced from the kitchen that he could contribute ninety cents, and half a dozen stamps.

The telephone rang. Robin commenced counting the money, rapidly and more or less accurately. Poppet sauntered back to the fire. The telephone rang again. Ricky picked up the receiver; and Robin said, 'There! I think that's fifteen. Do I sign anything? ——'

'In what?' Ricky asked; then: 'Good Lord! what've you done?'

'— No, not there, madam! On the line! Yes, that's it! Thank you ——'

Henry, with a third load of dishes, passed near Poppet. She began to hum — loudly, and deliberately.

Ricky put the receiver down again. 'I say!' he announced. 'Boots and Hilda are in jail!'

'Jail!'

Everybody looked interested.

'What've they been up to now?' Poppet inquired. 'Murdered the Mayor?'

'I don't know — something about a meeting in the park ——' He pulled his coat off a chair. 'Come on, Henry! We'll have to go and bail them out. Any one got any money?'

Robin turned quickly, opened the door, and went rushing down the corridor after the young man. 'Hey, Mr. Pants!' she leaped on him just as he was about to step into the elevator. 'I'm awfully sorry, but we'll have to have our money back!'

He looked blank.

'It's our brother,' she explained. 'He's in jail ——' And when Mr. Pance attempted to utter a few legitimate protests, she said, briskly: 'Hurry up, please, because we want to bail him out for dinner. He's got the steak ——' Then, somewhat more soothingly: 'It'll be all right. We'll give you some more. What's to-day? Wednesday? Well, come around on Saturday. We always have lots of money on Saturday ——'

The apartment was quiet now. Ricky and Henry and Denis had gone off to the rescue. The sunlight had faded, and the sky had turned green against the southern windows. Poppet went into her room; and Robin went into hers. Both closed their doors after them. Poppet started once more to search for the black hat. It was somewhere, of course. She must find it. It was just what she would need to-morrow. Where could she have left it? Where — where? Robin took her new dress off: she jerked it roughly over her head and threw it, inside-out, on to the floor of her closet. Then she put on a pale-colored, rather worn tea-gown that Mimsy had given her. She hooked it carefully, and flattened the lace with her finger-tips. Denis had once said that he liked it...

Boots's voice was audible — unescapable — from the moment that the elevator stopped at the farther end of the hall. It wasn't a conversational voice. It gave an impression of having been going on for a long, long time all by itself. It was loud, violent, terrifically earnest.

Robin and Poppet hurried out of the kitchen.

Mrs. McMasters, who had been lolling in front of the fire for the last forty minutes or so, sat up attentively.

The door opened.

Boots came in first. His eyes were blazing; his hair was on end. One of his coat-sleeves had been more or less thoroughly demolished, and on the other side, from the cuff of his trousers to his collar, he was caked with mud. He didn't greet anybody: he didn't appear to notice them, or even to recognize the apartment. He simply walked in, shouting: '— A lot of lies, that's all! A lot of filthy lies! And the poor fools ——' He stood in the middle of the room, glaring, and hurling words at no one in particular.

Hilda followed him. She was limping a bit. She had lost her hat, and her hair, which she usually kept plastered back in as unfeminine a fashion as possible, was rumpled engagingly. There was a rent in her skirt, and a long, deep scratch across one of her flushed cheeks. 'Scared!' she was declaring passionately. 'Of course he was scared of questions! He couldn't answer them! He couldn't do anything but yap, and make wise-cracks, and sneer at everybody who ——'

Denis sank into a chair. 'Whew!' he murmured.

Henry, coming in last, and looking decidedly bewildered, closed the door.

'— And told them there was an organized conspiracy, told them every other nation ——'

Ricky patted Boots's shoulder. 'All right, old chap!' he soothed. 'Simmer down!'

Robin and Poppet were chorusing: 'For Heaven's sake, what *happened?* Won't somebody tell us what ——'

'And kids there!' Hilda panted. 'Waving flags, and cheering him! Little kids ——'

'— And said he'd jail every pacifist in the country! Said they were traitors, and their property ought to be confiscated, and they ought to be wiped out as if they were vermin, and everything they ——'

'Hey!' Robin roared. 'Shut up! *Shut up*, Boots!'

Boots stopped abruptly, and sat down.

The sudden peace was quite staggering.

'Now, then!' Poppet requested. 'Blow by blow, darling, and be lucid because we're somewhat confused.'

Boots began again, still savage, but a trifle less thunderous: 'He said that unless the country ——'

'Who said?'

'The guy in the park ——'

'A Congressman,' Hilda supplemented.

'— Unless it strengthened its armaments right away, it'd be helpless in the next war because every other country in the world ——'

'I think,' Ricky inserted, 'that there must have been some sort of rally in the park.'

'Yeah!' Boots confirmed. 'Patriotic! Flags on the bandstand! A lot of guys in silk hats ——'

'And you,' Denis suggested, 'happened to pass by?'

'— And when he started handing out the tripe about an organized conspiracy, we yelled out that we wanted to ask him some questions, and he told us to shut up ——'

'Everybody told us to shut up!' Hilda rushed in with fiercely. 'And we wanted to know if he was scared of questions, and he said he wasn't scared of anything, and that if Boots would stick around till the speech was over he'd fight him, right there, in front of everybody ——'

'Yeah!' Boots snorted scathingly. 'Fight! That's him! He can't answer you, but he'll punch your nose! Swell logic ——'

'And then he started in razzing the League, and we yelled out again, and he said we were a couple of anarchists, and Boots said he was a liar ——'

'A damned liar,' Boots elaborated.

'And then it began.'

'What did?'

'The brawl.'

'Everybody landed on top of us ——'

'And Hilda got knocked over, and the kids raised hell ——'

'And the Congressman?' Robin inquired interestedly.

'Oh, he came climbing down, just to show how brave he was!'

'And I slapped his face!' Hilda remarked, with the first gleam of satisfaction that she had exhibited since entering the room. 'And then the police grabbed us.'

'Just you two?'

'And another guy. He wasn't doing anything, but he had a beard. I guess they thought he was an anarchist, too.'

'And what about the Congressman?'

'Oh, *him!*' Boots said bitterly. 'He'll get a medal to-morrow, and a swell tomb when he's dead!'

Hilda sat very erect, her chin high, and her scratch bleeding. 'Of course,' she said, 'we shan't pay the fine. We shall go to prison.'

'Of course!' Boots echoed. He got up abruptly, and stamped noisily into his room. He began peeling off his muddy clothes. His eyes were still blazing: he could have wept for the fury that was in his heart...

After a while Poppet knocked on the door. 'I say, Boots! You didn't happen to bring the steak home, did you?'

'What?'

'The steak, darling.'

'Steak!' he said. 'My God! ——' How could people stop and babble about food in the midst of such gigantic problems! Later on he had a sudden bright idea. He thrust his head out of the door: 'Hey, Ricky!' Ricky appeared; and, 'See here!' Boots began, holding his trousers in one hand and his shoes in the other. 'I've thought of something. You write a poem!'

Ricky looked blank.

'About that guy's speech,' he elucidated. 'A sort of ode — see? Give it to him like hell! And we can send it to all the newspapers, and have it printed on handbills, and mail it to people!'

Ricky was half-amused, half-aghast. 'Good Lord! I couldn't do that ——'

'Sure you can!' Boots declared, with mounting enthusiasm. 'You can do a swell one! Make it hot! Pump it into him! We can start a big row, and get everybody ——'

'But, look here, Boots — I'm awfully sorry, but I *couldn't!*'

Boots stopped short. 'Why?' he demanded.

It seemed more than obvious to Ricky. 'Poetry isn't — I mean, I couldn't make a *poem* about it.' The idea was outrageous, grotesque! 'We can write letters to the papers, if you like, but poetry — it's different — I couldn't *use* it like that! Don't you see?'

'You mean — it's sort of beneath you?'

'Yes. I suppose so. Something of the kind.'

Boots was upset: for several moments he was so violently upset that he could merely glare; then, 'Say!' he exploded. 'I like that! *I like that!*' He flourished his shoes with such vehemence that Ricky stepped back a bit, defensively. 'You can spend all your time writing about birds and lilies, and then, when you get a chance to do something big like this, you turn it down!' It was outrageous, grotesque! 'Can't use your poetry!' he repeated in a sort of roar. 'Why can't you? Why the devil *don't* you? What's the good of it, anyhow? Why don't you *do* something with it? Something that *matters!* Why don't you ——'

'Oh, shut up!' Ricky requested sharply.

And: 'Hell!' Boots shouted. 'You give me a pain in the neck!' He slammed the door, and sat down on the end of his bed. He felt thoroughly and tragically disgusted with every one he could think of. Why were people such unutterable idiots? Why didn't they wake up — realize things — *do* things? Ricky sweating over a sonnet to the moon, and refusing to use his eloquence against a man who was belching out hate and suspicion as fast as he could open his ugly mouth! And Ricky's crowd — all the same! A lot of lousy intellectuals, too damned civilized to take any interest in such matters! And college —— He snorted wrathfully. Try and talk about things at college! Politics — world affairs! They thought you were loony! You might as well talk about Jesus! It made you sick! It made you sick all through! Everybody standing off in corners — superior — looking bored, or sarcastic — letting people like that guy in the park manage everything for them, make their wars for them, *kill* them! The fools! The damned, blamed fools...

He went on sitting there on the bed, breathing hard.

After a while he calmed down a bit. He remembered Hilda. His thoughts turned to her, warmly, gratefully. Hilda was all right! Hilda didn't stand off in a corner. She'd been swell this afternoon. Given it to them hot and strong! No shilly-shallying! No backing out when the row started. When they knocked her over, she'd got right up again! Pitched into the middle of it! You could hear her voice all the time, above everybody and everything! She had a swell voice for crowds! He had never realized it before. Firm, and sort of deep. Most girls, if they had been shouting as loud as that, would have sounded awful! Daphne would have. Like a tin whistle ——

He stopped short at the thought of Daphne. He considered her for a moment. He considered her very carefully; and she seemed to him, all at once, definitely and completely negligible...

It happened at the end of the meal. They had all stood up, with the firelight glinting on their glasses; and Robin had pronounced: 'To Ricky — and to Ricky's book!' very loudly, as if she were calling it through a banquet-hall; and while they were drinking the toast the bell rang. Ricky, who had been looking somewhat embarrassed, said: 'Thanks awfully! — I'll answer it, shall I?' and left the table. A moment or two later the elevator stopped. There were voices at the other end of the hall; then silence; then rapid footsteps; then some one running through the open door...

Robin dropped her glass.

'*Mimsy!* —'

Everybody sprang round.

Poppet said: '*Oh!*' and Boots almost fell into the fire.

'A surprise!' Mimsy cried, holding her arms out to them. 'A surprise for you ——'

For a moment the Kiplings were too flabbergasted to stir; then they hurled themselves across the room. They surrounded Mimsy; they took possession of her — speechless — then all jabbering at once, laughing, deluging her with greetings, pelting her with questions. 'How on earth did you — why didn't you ——' They formed a small compact group, with the reddish firelight flickering over them, their arms linked, their voices interwoven: united, absorbed in one another, utterly complete.

The others — Henry, and Mrs. McMasters, and Denis, and Hilda with a smear of vaseline on her cheek, and a young man who had come in after Mimsy, carrying her suitcase — were isolated from the group. They were outside, no part of it, nothing but mute and inconsequential spectators. Denis lit a cigarette; the young man glanced at his watch.

'— And explained,' Mimsy was reporting, 'how I'd promised you to be back for Ricky's book, *promised* you! And they quite understood. They were perfectly dear about it! They made us come on ahead like this. We got into New York this afternoon, and just missed the regular plane, so Charles made arrangements for a special one ——'

The Kiplings hung on her words. They were enchanted! Mimsy tearing home to them in this spectacular fashion: a fast boat — an airplane — bursting through the door unannounced! It was exciting, dramatic; it was an arrival after their own hearts...

Mimsy, suddenly turning aside, broke the circle.

'Oh, Charles ——' She held her hand out to the young man, laughing, apologizing. 'I'm so sorry! Do come and meet my family.'

And Robin, immediately remembering, swung round with: 'Denis! Hey, Denis!' — and seized him excitedly by the arm and rushed him forward, crying: 'Look, Mimsy! — this is Denis!'

And Poppet said: 'How d'you do. May I call you Charles, too? Widderness is such a mouthful. This is Boots, and that's Hilda Morris ——'

Mimsy moved through the welter of introductions and greetings, gayly and gracefully. 'It *is* nice to meet you! I've heard ever so much about you, of course. Robin's letters ——'

'— And the shrinking violet's Henry Prescott, and the fat lady's Mrs. Mac who plucked us out of the gutter when we were kids ——'

'Have you, really? I hope it was something nice! Oh, Charles! this is ——'

Robin grasped Widderness's hand and pumped it up and down with great gusto. 'It was terribly kind of you to get her here like this! We *do* appreciate it! Won't you take your coat off? Won't you stay? Wouldn't you like something to eat?'

'Sure!' Poppet encouraged. 'Stay! Eat! There's plenty of cheese left.'

He said, somewhat hastily: 'Thanks very much, but I'm afraid I shall have to dash off. I just wanted to make sure that she arrived, you know ——'

Mimsy accompanied him to the door. She stood there for a moment or two, talking to him, with the harsh light from the hall slashing across her. She was in gray, with a fur over her arm, and a band of thin, dull-silver leaves clasping her throat. Her hands were still gloved; her hair was completely concealed by a mauve turban that accentuated the paleness of her skin and the delicacy of her features. She was leaning forward a little, her profile etched against the solid green of the corridor wall. The wall seemed, somehow, to belong to her: to be there for no other purpose than to provide a background for her grace. Mimsy did that to things. Gently, subtly, she took possession of atmospheres and physical environments, compelling them to serve herself, either by way of complement or contrast. A room — a garden — they were significant only as her setting. If drab, she shone out against them with an opposing and emphasized radiance; if beautiful, she used their beauty as a flattering reënforcement of her own...

Robin, still clasping Denis's arm, said: 'Isn't she darling! Don't you like her! Don't you think she's lovely ——'

Then Mimsy closed the door, and came back into the room.

They all swarmed about her again. They made her sit beside the fire; and Ricky got her another cushion; and Boots poured her out a cup of coffee; and Poppet commanded, 'Take your hat off — quick! I want to see how you look without it!' — and then, 'Oh, you've done your hair differently! Turn round a bit! Now the other way. Mm! I *like* it!' And everybody gazed at Mimsy's hair: parted in the middle and drawn down, pale and sleek, into a loose coil on her neck. And Robin, squatting on the hearth, hugged her arms round her knees, and said: 'Oh, you *do* look beautiful!' — frankly, simply. And Mimsy laughed up at Denis, and said: 'I shan't try to blush, because I suppose you are quite used to her by now.' And Denis, laughing back, said: 'I quite agree with her.'

Boots had already gone to sleep. Ricky was out in the kitchen in his pajamas, eating an orange. Poppet, slinging a towel over her shoulder, announced: 'I'm going to have a bath, so if anybody wants to use the bathroom make it snappy.' Robin hurried in, doused her face with cold water, and came out again. She meandered into the room across the hall and sat on the end of the bed, drying herself, and watching Mimsy comb her hair. She felt warm, tranquil, drowsy-eyed. She yawned, and said:

'There are such millions of things I want to ask you, but I can't seem to think of any of them.'

Mimsy nodded. 'I know. We're tired now. We can have a good old pow-wow to-morrow ——'

Poppet wandered in. 'Soap,' she requested.

Robin looked vague. 'There's a bar of something on the radiator.'

'Window-polish,' Poppet said. 'I'm funny that way. I never like cleaning myself with window-polish.' She sat down abruptly, her legs shooting out in front of her and her hands thrust into the pockets of her dilapidated bathrobe. 'Well, Margaret, how's it seem?'

'Nice!' Mimsy said. She lifted the comb again, and the sleeve of her negligee opened up, fanwise, as delicate as a web.

Poppet studied her for a moment, speculatively; then: 'You know — it's silly — but I feel quite in awe of you.'

'Of me? Good gracious! Why?'

She shrugged her shoulders. 'I dunno. Just thinking of all the places you've been to that we haven't; all the things you've had — done ——'

Mimsy pointed out quickly: 'There are things that you have, that you've done ——'

'True,' Poppet acknowledged. 'There's the old career, of course. You've never had cheering thousands hurl flowers at your feet.'

And Robin, woggling her slippers back and forth on the tips of her toes, thought, suddenly, shiningly: 'And you haven't got Denis!' Denis. She leaned forward and said: 'Say, Mimsy! — you do like him, don't you? You do like Denis?'

'Very much,' Mimsy said. 'I think he's charming.'

Robin glowed. 'Yes, *isn't* he! And he likes you, too! He told me he did.'

'*And* me!' Poppet completed. 'Don't forget little sister. He thinks I'm thoroughly delightful.'

Mimsy, putting the comb on the dressing-table, turned round. 'And what,' she inquired, 'is your opinion of Charles?'

Robin was a bit dubious. 'I'm afraid I didn't really notice him. Is he nice?'

'Yes. I think so.'

Poppet remarked casually: 'I suppose you're going to marry him?'

'I suppose so.' Robin looked up quickly; and Mimsy came and sat down on the other end of the bed. 'That is, I'm not quite sure yet.'

'You mean, not sure if you love him?'

'Oh — I'm very fond of him.'

'I see,' Poppet observed. '*That* kind of a marriage.'

'Yes,' Mimsy said. She was cool, serious. 'That kind. It would be nice, I think. We like the same things, the same people. Mr. and Mrs. Widderness would be very pleased, of course. It seems — reasonable.'

'Sure!' Poppet agreed. 'Swell. But suppose you fall in love with somebody afterwards?'

Mimsy leaned against the pillows, and clasped her hands loosely behind her gleaming head. The sleeves of her negligee fell open again, soft, apricot-colored. 'Well, you have to run that risk anyhow, don't you?'

'Mm. That's so. But in a case like this it'd probably happen sooner — and harder.'

Robin, sitting up straight, said: 'Oh, I don't think you ought to marry him if you don't love him, Mimsy! Really I don't!' She was very sure, very earnest.

'I don't see why,' Mimsy returned, looking thoughtful. 'I've considered it a good deal, carefully, and I don't see why. If I didn't like him, of course, it would be out of the question. But I do like him. Very much. And if I marry him I'll have — well — the sort of life that I want.' She paused for a moment. 'It sounds so wretchedly — crude, doesn't it!' She crisped her voice suddenly, without stiffening the languid grace of her posture: 'But it *shouldn't!* It's only because there's such a frightful lot of convention and sentimentality wrapped over things of this sort. When you try to be rational about them, you feel — *wrong* — you know, selling yourself for money — all that kind of thing. It's stupid.' She said, very deliberately: 'It seems to me it would be far more admirable for me to accept Charles — because I like him, and because he can give me the sort of life that appeals to me — than to rush into marriage with some one I happened to be infatuated with, and then, when the excitement was all over, have nothing left to go on with.'

She paused again; and Poppet observed, nonchalantly:

'Of course, some people would rather have a bit of the excitement than a lot of — well — luxurious safety.'

'Certainly,' Mimsy granted. 'It's simply a question of weighing values, isn't it? We can't have everything, that's obvious; so — what would we rather have? I think that in my case it'll probably be Charles Widderness.'

Robin was puzzled, distressed. All this coolness, this careful calculating . . .

Poppet said: 'Well, it isn't the sort of life I'd choose myself, but you know what you want, of course.' She stood up again, stretching herself. 'And no doubt, if he's a sufficiently civilized person, when another man appears — arrangements, and so on ——'

Mimsy turned quickly. 'If I marry him,' she said, 'I shall do the thing decently. Of course!'

'Oh ——' Poppet shrugged her shoulders. 'In that case ——' and looked skeptical.

Poppet, pausing in the doorway, turned, then came back into the room. She picked up the negligee that Mimsy had just slipped off. It felt soft and fragile between her fingers.

'May I try it on?'

'Why, of course ——'

She stood in front of the mirror and drew the filmy stuff over her pajamas. It fell about her graciously, in pale-colored folds. She lifted her arms, and the sleeves were like gossamer fans on either side of her. She looked different in the mirror: quiet, mysterious, somehow — *bridal.*

'It's rather lovely, isn't it?' Mimsy said.

Poppet turned. 'Will you give it to me?' she asked.

Mimsy was surprised. 'Give it to you?'

'Yes.'

'Why — I suppose so. Of course. If you would like to have it.'

'I would,' Poppet said. 'Very much.'

She went back into her own room, and took the negligee off, and packed it very carefully into her open trunk...

9

At breakfast Poppet said: 'Look here, can't we all have lunch at home to-day?' She was quite pressing about it. 'You, Boots?' Boots didn't have a class until two-thirty, so he would be there, anyhow. 'And Ricky?' Why, yes — he could make it all right. 'And you can come back, Robin, can't you?' Robin wasn't sure: 'I think perhaps I'd better snatch a bite at the Tavern. There's such an awful lot ——' Poppet protested quickly: 'Oh, no! come home. Please! I'm going to see Clumington this morning, and I'll call in for you afterwards. Mimsy'll have everything ready, won't you, Mimsy?' 'I'll make an omelette,' Mimsy promised. And, '*Do!*' Boots encouraged earnestly. 'We haven't had a decent one for months.'

After the brilliance and bluster of the park the Tavern seemed warm, dim, rich. There was a blazing fire at the farther end of the room; the candles were lit — giving a fluctuating brightness to the shields, and to the vivid colored banners slung against the dark walls. There were already a number of people at the tables; and waitresses were beginning to move about briskly, their yellow skirts deepening to orange as they passed in front of the fireplace, and their trays and water-bottles flashing silver as the light struck across them...

The gentleman in the plumed helmet said:

'Oh — hello, Miss Poppet! Are you back?'

'Sure. Haven't you seen the morning papers? Hey, Alma! Hey, Mrs. Wethern! — know where the boss is?'

In the office, Mrs. Wethern believed; and managed to impart the information without impairing for the fraction of a second the width and glitter of her hostess-smile. But the office was empty; and Robin was finally located in the kitchen, lapping soup out of a huge ladle while three cooks, with cocked white caps, watched her with interest.

'It's grand!' she was reporting. 'Of course there's nothing the matter with it! The old lady must be cracked ——'

Poppet broke into the circle. 'You can come now, can't you? It's twelve. Hello, Sam. Hello, Kuntz. Hello —— Oh, you're a new one!'

'Jean,' Robin said. 'He's French. This is my sister, Jean. Is it really twelve? All right, let's skoot ——'

Outside on the pavement she thrust her arm through Poppet's. 'I ought to be hung, you know, for running off like this. You should see the work on my desk!'

'Oh, well, an hour or two ——'

'Sure!' she agreed cheerfully. 'What's it matter!' And, as they started down the street at a brisk trot: 'It's funny — but I don't seem to give a whoop about the Tavern. And I used to be so terribly proud of it! Remember? — Oh, Mike! Yoo-hoo, Mike!' A policeman waved to them, and stopped the traffic with an elaborate flourish. 'Thanks!' Robin shouted; and they dashed across the road and into the park.

The sky was radiantly blue. It was littered with small, swiftly flying clouds which gave to the day a freakish and vivacious aspect. The sunshine kept leaping across the grass, then fading, then leaping out again; now the pond was luminous, now lack-luster; now the trees were mustard-colored, and now they were plumes of yellow fire, scattering their bright sparks into the hands of the wind.

Poppet said to herself: 'All right! Here we are! Now — go!' And she might have been standing in the wings, about to make an entrance — that same clutch of excitement in her throat, that same weakness in her limbs. Ahead of them an old gentleman, his chin muffled in a brown scarf, and the leaves falling all about him, was feeding bread-crumbs to a swarm of pigeons. Her eyes jumped to him; her thoughts snatched him up — involuntarily, eagerly. He was standing in the middle of the path. Perhaps she had better wait until they had passed him. Yes, she had better wait! Of course! And, on the heels of the decision, a quick surge of relief, a sort of foolish gratitude for the momentary postponement...

The old gentleman lifting his hat; Robin saying: 'Good-morning, Mr. Hunter. Gosh! aren't they getting *enormous!*'

All right! Now! Hurry! Go on, go on ——

The zoom of an approaching airplane. It was coming this way. In a minute or two it would be above them. She had better wait. Yes. There was no use trying to speak until it had passed. Robin always wanted to stop and gaze up at airplanes. 'Oh, look! you can see somebody's head ——' The zoom melting back again into the quietness of the sky. Nothing left but the crisp sound of wind in trees, the blurred sound of traffic outside the park.

Now! Now, then! Quick! 'I say, Robin — I've got to tell you something. I'm going away with Rand Tarvin this afternoon.' A pause; then a sudden terrifying sense of uncertainty. Had she really said that? Or had the declaration merely taken place in her thought? Since the day before yesterday she had rehearsed those words to herself such an infinite number of times; perhaps ——

Then Robin settling it; Robin repeating: 'Going away ——'

'Yes. To live with him, I mean.' And, as she spoke, her agitation stiffening itself into a sort of brittle composure. This was the moment that she had been shrinking from, warding off: it was here — now — she was in the midst of it! There was no backing out, or leaping over it. It had to be gone through thoroughly — point by point, word by word. 'He has a place in North Carolina. Near Asheville. We're going there. I don't know for how long — the winter, perhaps. The train leaves at four this afternoon ——'

Robin looking at her. 'You don't mean it, do you, Poppet?'

'Yes.' Oh, hurry up — *hurry up!* Don't sound so blank! Understand it — *accept* it!

'But, Poppet — Poppet ——'

'It's no good making a fuss, Robin. It's no good any of you making a fuss.'

A nursemaid with two children: a little girl carrying a doll, a little boy dragging a toy engine on a piece of red string...

Robin asking: 'You — love one another?'

'Yes.'

'Then why don't you get married?'

'Because we don't want to. We're not fools. We know it can't last. What's the use of tying ourselves up?' Rand Tarvin in front of a minister saying: I do! *Mrs.* Rand Tarvin! Somehow, it was funny — fantastic! As well imagine a faun trapped into marriage. 'Don't you see, Robin, we're doing it intelligently, and decently! People lie to themselves. They're cowards. They haven't got the guts to break a thing off when it's finished. They go on dragging it out — degrading it — living together because they're bound, because they're afraid not to, from force of habit! It's sordid — *ugly!* I'm going away with Rand because we love one another, and when we stop loving one another, we'll — quit!'

Robin demanding quickly: 'And suppose both of you don't stop at once?'

'Then, obviously, it's up to the one who doesn't to be a good sport.' A good sport! Yes, of course! They could trust one another. They had promised: 'When either of us begins to feel ——'

Leaves blowing on the pond; a blaze of sunshine in the trees.

Robin's eyes fixed on her, wide, and dark with distress. 'But if you're so sure that it won't last — only a few months — what's the good of going away? What's the good of it, Poppet? Why don't you just wait and sort of — get over it — let it die out!'

'But I don't want to let it die out! Why should I? I want to *live* it out!' And, inside, underneath her careful composure, something crying: 'Oh, can't you see? Can't you understand? This is an — adventure! I'm going off to a strange place; I'm leaving you all! It's exciting — terrifying! It's all shrouded in bright mists. It's like things in songs and poems. An adventure! A challenge! Oh, don't you see?' — What if it wouldn't last, couldn't last! It was something brave and beautiful flashing across her life. And it would never be spoiled, never be dragged down into drabness or bitterness. While it was still beautiful they would cut it off. Cut it off short! Yes — yes! They weren't afraid of doing that! They were starting out knowing that it must end: free from all the tawdry illusions of conventional romance, forearmed with honesty. 'When either of us begins to feel ——' Oh, they would, they would! Even though her heart turned faint at the thought, one day they would both realize that it was — finished. And instead of flinching from the truth, they would say: 'Well, it's been swell, hasn't it! Good-bye ——' Just like that! 'Good-bye.' Abruptly, gallantly!

Gallantly!

That was a Kipling word! She must try not to use such terms. They smacked of a sort of grandiose sentimentalism. She must try to be more casual. What was it Rand had said? 'For God's sake, don't let's be solemn about it!' She must remember that. It was an adventure! To be plunged into debonairly, joyously. She must try not to take it with such desperate *earnestness* ——

Robin's voice, with a sudden note of triumph: 'But you *can't*, Poppet! Of course you can't! There's your work — there's Clumington ——'

'I saw him this morning. I told him I wasn't coming back.'

'Oh, *Poppet*——'

Deliberately, distinctly: 'Don't you see, Robin, an experience like this will be of more value to me as an artist than half a dozen seasons with Clumington!' Rand had said that. Develop! Enrich! It was true, of course. She would gain something that could never be acquired in a rehearsal-room. She had told herself that this morning, all the time Clumington had been rowing her. 'I shall be a better actress afterwards! A better actress ——' She had clung to the words. She had thought: 'No! No! I am not forsaking my work! I am preparing myself for it!'

As they entered the apartment, Poppet said: 'I wonder if you would mind telling the others, Robin. I've a bit more packing to do ——' and went immediately into her own room and closed the door.

She sat down on the end of the bed, folding her gloved hands together in her lap. She sat very still, listening. Perhaps Ricky hadn't come home yet. She waited. Yes — there was his voice. And Boots's. And now Mimsy's. They were all there. Oh, keep quiet, be calm! It would soon be over! A silence. No sound, except from the clock on the bureau. What time was it? A quarter to eleven. Wrong as usual. Their clocks were invariably wrong. Robin was always rushing round setting them by stray horns and whistles —— Where were they? At the farther end of the living-room, perhaps. She was telling them now, of course! How was she saying it? How were they looking? Silence. She began to peel off her kid gloves. They were rather soiled. She should have noticed that before — twelve minutes to eleven. How long would it take Robin to tell them? Would she have finished by now? What way was there of knowing? She got up and crossed the room stealthily. She pressed her ear against the keyhole. There was no sound. They must be talking in whispers. She went back to the bed, and sat down again. Oh, this was awful! Why on earth hadn't she told them herself? Or why hadn't she left the door open, at any rate? Closing the door had done something subtle to the situation. It had made it *set*. She couldn't just wander out casually; she would have to open the door first, and they would hear her moving the knob, and would all turn to face her. For a moment there would be, inevitably, a sort of — tableau! Horrible! She put her gloves down on the bed, and took her hat off. Ten minutes to eleven. She would have finished by now, surely! Of course! What was there to tell? 'Poppet is going away with Rand Tarvin this afternoon.' That was all. She must have finished minutes ago. And they were all waiting for her. Waiting —— Oh, idiot! why had she come in here! Why had she deliberately put herself in this position! The big hand had passed the little hand on the clock. She must go out to them. She must! There was no use wasting time like this! Come on, get up!

She got up.

Oh, don't tremble! Don't be a *ninny!*

She opened the door, and said: 'By the way, Robin, do you happen to know where that little black hat of mine is? I've hunted ——'

Yes. They were at the farther end of the living-room, and had all turned. They had been whispering together; they looked, somehow, guilty — as if she had caught them at something reprehensible. They just stood there for a moment. Tableau!

'It doesn't seem to be anywhere in my closet ——'

Boots cut her short: 'Look here!' he roared. 'Don't be a crazy fool, Poppet!'

She flared up in return, quickly, with an inexplicable sense of relief. 'This is none of your business, Boots! You may as well ——'

'*Isn't* it!' He was very red; he was violently upset. 'Say! if you think we're going to stand round and let a lousy guy like ——'

Something tautened in her at that. She stamped her foot; she shouted: 'Shut up, Boots! Shut up!'

There was a certain impressiveness in her savagery.

Ricky said: 'Yes! For Heaven's sake, shut up, Boots!'

Boots clasped his hands behind his back, glaring, and breathing hard.

There was a pause.

'Can't — can't we sit down?' Mimsy suggested. 'And talk it over.'

The studied reasonableness of her manner grated on Poppet's nerves.

'There's nothing to talk over,' she snapped. 'It's settled!'

Boots broke out again: 'Is he in town now — Tarvin?'

'Yes.'

'Where?'

'Oh, no, you *don't!*' she said quickly. She could just see him — bolting off to the Blackmore Hotel, spouting invectives, brandishing his arms! One of those noisy, crude, humiliating scenes! She concentrated her attention on Boots for several moments: 'You're pretty good, aren't you! You run round babbling about liberty, about the rights of the individual ——'

He didn't budge. That was all very well! It wasn't the ethics of the case — it was the person involved! It wasn't her going away and living with some one that he so fiercely objected to; it was Rand Tarvin. If he and Hilda, for instance, were to decide to live together, it would be a different matter. It would be an intensely serious, and highly moral, undertaking. But with Tarvin, according to hearsay, it was a sort of — habit! That was what upset him! Poppet taking her turn with a Don Juan!

He flung out belligerently: 'I suppose you don't think you're the first person he's gone off with like this!'

'No,' she said. 'Of course not. Considering he's over thirty, it would be rather odd if I were.'

She crossed the room, and picked a packet of cigarettes off the mantel.

They all followed her with their eyes.

Robin thought: 'Oh, what ought we to say? *What ought we to say!*' She didn't know. She couldn't seem to think of anything. But there *must* be things! There must be all sorts of arguments that they should be presenting. What would Mrs. Widderness say, for instance? Or Mrs. Mac? They would believe that Poppet was wrong. They wouldn't feel bewildered and uncertain, as she did. They would say — what? 'It is wicked to live with somebody you aren't married to.' But then Poppet didn't believe that: Poppet only believed it was wicked to live with somebody you didn't love. Or they would say: 'What will other people think?' But that would be useless: she was too impressed with Poppet's sincerity to throw out such a cheap sort of obstacle.

She clasped her hands together, an old gesture of perplexity. It seemed to her, all at once, that they — the Kiplings — were extraordinarily *ignorant.* Although Poppet was about to do something for which she would be almost universally condemned, they could offer no convincing reasons why she shouldn't do it.

She appealed to Ricky: 'Can't you think of anything to say to her, Ricky?'

He couldn't. He felt at an utter loss. It wasn't, he told himself, as if Poppet were being dragged astray, melodramatically seduced. It was absurd to look at the thing like that. No doubt she had gone over every conceivable facet of the situation, traced out effects, weighed together pros and cons. She knew precisely what she was doing, and she was determined to do it. What *could* one say? There was the conventional 'It is wrong.' But why? What reasons — proofs? One couldn't simply state that it was wrong. Apparently it seemed supremely right to her. And perhaps it was. How could he tell? How could anybody standing on the outside tell? Or perhaps he was mistaken there. Perhaps an impartial observer, free from the emotions which must necessarily color the reasoning of the actual participants, was the only one competent to judge. But then, in this case, he could scarcely be considered an observer. He was little more than the recipient of an announcement. He wasn't qualified to pass judgment. Tarvin, for instance. He hadn't spoken to him more than half a dozen times. And perhaps that was the crux of the whole matter: how Tarvin was taking this affair...

He said, 'I don't know, Robin,' and saw by the expression on her face that she had been expecting him to take a grip on the situation. He felt suddenly angry with himself. Why, when it came to things of this sort, was he always so wretchedly *inadequate!* Even if he couldn't, from his own incomplete understanding of the case, attempt to convince Poppet that she was wrong, he might at least make an effort to present something of the other side. He ought to! It was a duty! 'Come on!' he instructed himself. 'There's her work! Ask how this will affect her work!'

But something seemed to prevent him from speaking: that innate terror of meddling, of prying into another person's business...

Mimsy said: 'But, Poppet — Poppet, darling! don't you realize what this means! It's going to change your whole life! It's going to make everything so horribly difficult for you!'

The match in Poppet's hand was shaking slightly. 'I'm not scared of difficulties!'

Mimsy was grave, positive. 'But it's *cheapening* yourself so! It's letting ——'

Poppet flung both the match and the cigarette into the fireplace, and turned round. 'Cheapening!' she repeated. 'I suppose you think it would be a better stroke of business if I traded myself for a swell house and a pack of servants! That's your idea, isn't it? Value received for value given!' She bit the words off contemptuously. 'A very bright idea — only I happen to want something bigger! That's all! Something decent, with a little beauty to it!'

'Decent!' Boots snorted. 'I don't call running away with ——'

'I'm not running away!' she flashed out.

Her denial presented an idea that hadn't occurred to him before. 'Oh, aren't you! Then what're you disappearing into North Carolina for? Why don't you stay here and live with him?'

She explained quickly, hotly: 'Because he's going to write a new play this winter, and he does all his writing down there. I'm not running away! Or "disappearing"! If you think I am, you're making a fat mistake! I'm not afraid — and I'm not ashamed either! Not in the slightest!' Her attitude as she confronted them was instinctively dramatic: arms thrown behind her back, chin up.

Robin, watching her, felt for the first time a small, involuntary thrill. Poppet was standing against every one! She was proud, dauntless...

Ricky said: 'No. We don't believe you are.' That seemed obvious enough. 'But, look here, Poppet, there's your work! Have you thought about that? This will mean ——'

She cut in with 'I am only giving it up for a few months,' and, all at once, was intensely grateful that she *had* something to give up! A sacrifice. It lent a certain weight, a certain dignity, to her position. She wished that there were other things that it was necessary for her to sacrifice!

None of them spoke.

And suddenly, in the silence, it came to her, more clearly than ever before, how tremendously concerned they were with her career. They were proud of it! They believed in it! They believed from the bottom of their hearts that she was going to be a great actress! And now ——

She leaned forward a little. She told them: 'Oh, I'm not deserting it! Don't think that! I shall come back to it! I promise you!'

They sat down to lunch. They were all silent for several minutes, and awkward. Nobody knew quite how to behave — whether to be casual or solemn, glum or voluble. Their knives and forks seemed to make an inordinate amount of noise. Rolls, as they were broken open, crackled loudly.

Boots picked his glass up, and the water could be heard going down his throat as he drank it. Guggle — guggle! The others glanced at him; then gazed at their plates again. Robin said, 'Salt, please,' and promptly felt conscience-stricken, as if it were inexcusably frivolous to desire so trivial a thing as salt for one's omelette when there were such momentous happenings in the air. Mimsy passed the salt; and Boots went on eating again — largely, but without relish.

Ricky asked: 'It's near Asheville, you say?'

'Yes.'

Another silence; then,

'It'll — it's nice there, I suppose,' remarked Robin.

'Yes, very. A lot of mountains, of course.'

'Mountains? Are there!'

After a while Ricky wanted to know just where Asheville was: 'In the northwest of the State, isn't it?'

Poppet wasn't sure. None of them were sure.

Robin got up, went into another room, and came back in a moment or two with an atlas. She opened it to the map of North Carolina, and, pushing aside a dish of preserves, laid it flat on the table.

Everybody leaned forward.

'There!' Ricky pointed to the spot with his butter-knife.

They studied it interestedly.

'And do all those ripples mean mountains?' Robin inquired. She was quite impressed. 'Gosh! you'll be able to do a lot of climbing, won't you! ——'

The question occurred to Boots just as they were leaving the table. He swung round abruptly. 'Say!' his voice flared out again, 'are you going to let Tarvin keep you all winter?'

Poppet stopped short. She looked startled.

'Haven't you any money?' Robin demanded quickly.

'No — I mean, not much. Only seventy dollars or so.' She stood motionless for a moment, facing them. How odd that she shouldn't have thought of that!

'But what've you done with all you earned this summer, Poppet?'

'I — oh, I don't know. Different things ——' The cruise; Ricky's presents; a long string of casual and unrecorded loans...

She felt jolted, agitated. Rand would laugh at her, of course! Money? Bosh! What did it matter where it came from! Perhaps it *didn't.* But — kept! It wasn't a pleasant word!

They were all watching her.

She said: 'I hadn't thought of that. We — haven't had time to discuss everything. It's been so sudden. You do see that, don't you?' She was most anxious for them to see it, to believe that she hadn't deliberately disregarded this aspect of the situation.

Boots was severe and relentless: 'Well, what're you going to do about it!'

She didn't know. She said: 'I don't know.' Then, quickly, defensively: 'But I'll think of something, of course!'

After she had gone back into her room to finish packing, the others drew together.

'Look here!' Boots began, his voice low but fierce. 'We can't let her live off him! We can't let her do *that!*' It was an intolerable thought! Rand Tarvin buying Poppet's food, doling out Poppet's spending-money!

Mimsy suggested: 'But isn't it the very least he can do? Oughtn't he to look after her?'

The rest of them flung the idea aside. If Poppet was going away, she must go financially independent. That was obvious! Suppose she were to want to come home suddenly; or suppose —— But it wasn't merely that: it was something deeper. A moral, as well as a practical, necessity. To accept nothing from Tarvin would, somehow, give to her position a certain dignity, a certain *respectableness*...

'Of course!' Robin concluded. She turned abruptly, and hurried across the room. She pulled several letters off the mantel, and a check-book out of one of the desk drawers.

Then she came back to the table and sat down. 'Thank Heavens, nobody posted them!' She began tearing the letters open quickly: 'Rent — gas — light — velvet dress — florist — records —— Add them up, will you, Boots?' She consulted the check-book.

'Three hundred and twenty-seven thirty,' Boots reported.

'And there's another eleven in the bank ——'

'Make it a straight five hundred,' Ricky suggested. 'We can get some more in before she cashes it.' He handed Robin his pen; and they all stood round her in silence while she scribbled out a check.

'There!'

Boots was enormously relieved. Also, he was faintly triumphant. Tarvin wouldn't like this, of course! He sensed that. He sensed that it would deprive him not merely of a conventional advantage, but of a certain subtly gratifying consciousness of responsibility...

Robin got up again, with the check folded in her hand. 'Don't anybody say anything,' she warned. 'She might row us!'

Poppet had just locked her trunk. She was flushed, and rather breathless, with her hair shoved behind her ears and the sleeves of her red dress rolled above her elbows.

'They'll be calling for it to-morrow morning,' she told Robin. 'It's all ready. The labels are on, and the keys ——'

'Here they are,' Robin picked them off the bureau. 'I'll put them in your bag for you.'

Mimsy came in. 'Is there anything I can do, Poppet?'

'No — I don't think so, thanks — or — yes! My gloves. They're filthy! D'you suppose you could clean them up a bit?'

Mimsy said, 'Just a moment,' and went out again.

Robin closed the bag. There, that was done! She seated herself on the bed, leaning forward, with her arms clasped round her knees. She watched Poppet rushing back and forth, throwing things into drawers, hanging things up in the closet. The room was full of excitement. She could feel it.

She could feel herself responding to it: her heart beginning to thump, her cheeks burning!

'What're you going to wear, Poppet?'

'Oh, this, I guess. It won't show the dirt ——'

Mimsy came back, bringing a pair of new gloves folded sleekly in an ivory-colored box. 'These will go with your things all right, won't they?'

Poppet stood still for a moment. She was surprised — grateful. 'That's awfully nice of you, Mimsy!'

Robin promptly jumped up, and darted out of the room.

Boots strode in.

'D'you want me to lock your trunk?'

'I've done it, thanks.'

The front door was opened, then closed.

Mimsy went round picking things up from the floor, and piling them neatly on the bed.

Boots suggested: 'Give me your shoes and I'll clean them for you.'

Poppet leaned against the bureau and pulled them off. 'Thanks. And bang that heel a bit, will you? It's sort of wobbly.'

Robin appeared once more, bearing a silk scarf, a pair of elaborately feathered mules, and a brightly painted can of dusting-powder.

'Here! Put these in your valise.'

Poppet tried to protest; but ——

'Sure,' she said, quickly, off-handedly. 'I don't want them.'

Then the front door was opened again; and Ricky, wearing his coat, came into the room with two or three magazines and a box of chocolates.

'For the train,' he remarked, dropping them on to a chair.

And Boots brought back her shoes, shining magnificently.

And Robin hurried into the hall and got one of the towels embroidered with yellow ships out of the linen-closet, and hung it on Poppet's rail in the bathroom, as if she were a special guest...

At three o'clock a taxi arrived.

When Poppet entered the living-room, wearing the new gloves and carrying the magazines and chocolates under her arm, she found the others waiting for her with their hats and coats on. She stopped short. 'Oh ——'

There was a blank pause; then,

'Hadn't we — don't you think we had better say good-bye here?'

They understood at once. Of course! Tarvin. She must be going to meet him somewhere. They took their hats and coats off again. They felt sharply disappointed; also, for the first time, they felt consciously jealous. He might, they fumed to themselves, at least have kept out of the way long enough for them to give Poppet a proper farewell!

Poppet had flushed slightly. 'I'm sorry — but you — you understand, don't you? It would only make it sort of ——'

'Oh, that's all right,' they assured her.

Having discarded their outdoor things, they stood awkwardly about the room. Nobody knew how to bring the scene to a close.

'You've got everything you need, Poppet?'

'Yes, thank you ——'

Another silence; then,

'And the trunk — you'll be sure ——'

'Oh, we'll send it off.'

Boots took his handkerchief out of his pocket and blew his nose, although it didn't require blowing.

Ricky said: 'You'll drop us a line when you arrive, won't you?'

'I'll — telegraph, if you like. And you'll all ——'

'Oh, of course,' they promised quickly. 'We'll write a lot. We'll let you know everything.'

Silence again; then,

'Well — I suppose I'd better ——' She warned herself, with a sudden sense of panic: 'Come on! Don't say any more! *Run!*' But she couldn't; she couldn't leave them like that. She said: 'Good-bye, Mimsy,' and kissed Mimsy; 'Good-bye, Boots ——' And then, abruptly, she did what she had been secretly afraid that she might do. She began to cry. Not gently; but in a loud, violent, uncontrollable fashion.

Everybody started forward.

Robin said: 'Oh, don't, Poppet! Don't do that, Poppet!' and flung her arms round her, knocking the chocolates and magazines on to the floor.

But she couldn't stop herself for several moments. Her shoulders shook; the tears poured down her cheeks. 'I — I — I'm not — scared,' she managed to thrust out, in defense. 'It's — be-because I — I'm — excited ——'

They agreed — hurriedly, somewhat elaborately, anxious to show her that they had no intention of taking any advantage of this brief spasm of weakness. 'Yes, of course! You're excited ——'

And Boots lent her his handkerchief.

And Robin went on patting her, encouraging her, saying:

'There! it's all right, Poppet! It'll be all right ——'

The taxi turned the corner.

Poppet was sitting in the middle of the seat, leaning forward, her hands gripped together. She said: 'I am going to meet him; I am beginning the adventure.' But the words were sounds, no more; they held no significance, no beauty. She said them again, but still they meant nothing to her. She said his name: 'Rand — Rand Tarvin.' She shut her eyes and tried to visualize him. She couldn't. His face seemed to be swimming in a mist, just beyond the range of her perception. It swam out a little, then receded; now, for a moment, it was becoming clear — clearer — his mouth — his long, sloping brows —— Oh, quick! seize it — *hold* it! But it was lost again: a shape in a mist, pale, blank, shifting evasively. She unlocked her hands and pressed them over her eyes. What was the matter? She seemed to be full of confusion. 'Rand — Rand ——' It was more than his image that was eluding her. It was he, himself. Rand Tarvin. What was he like? Who was he? Why was she going away with him? She found herself growing hot, trembling with consternation. She said: 'Oh, don't be an idiot! Stop this! *Stop it!*' She was going away with him because she loved him. Of course! She loved him. 'I love Rand Tarvin.' Why didn't the words *mean* something! Why didn't they flash and burn, as they had an hour ago! She loved him, and so she was going away with him. This was her adventure. Wasn't it? Yes! Of course! She was beginning it now. Her beautiful adventure ——

She gripped her hands together again. The taxi swayed, and she swayed with it. She caught sight of her face, mirrored in the tilted glass above the driver. It was flushed, wet, with enormous eyes. It looked — frightened. Yes, *frightened!* She stared at it for a moment; then turned away quickly. South Street. Cars, a lemon-colored bus, people, the glitter of shop-windows. Now the park gates. The balloon-man: blobs of crimson, and purple. Bower Street — Clement —— Only another five blocks! Now four! Now three! The Blackmore Hotel. Rand Tarvin, waiting — waiting ——

She suddenly sprang forward and pounded against the partition with her fist.

'Hey! Hey, driver! Stop!'

He glanced round. 'Here ——?'

'Yes.'

He drew up abruptly at the curb; and she plunged out, dragging her valise with her.

After she had paid the fare, she stood motionless on the sidewalk. She was breathing hard; she was conscious of nothing except that she couldn't go to him like this. She must get some sort of grip on herself. She must. She *must!* He would be — how? Debonair, casual — the words came readily enough, although still without invoking his image. He had said: 'For God's sake, don't let's be solemn about it!'

She couldn't go to him like this, her mouth tense, her hands trembling ——

She seemed to be in everybody's way. People bumped against her, shoved her. She scarcely noticed them. The confusion of the street was negligible compared with this strange, turbulent, inexplicable confusion within her. She pleaded with herself: 'Oh, buck up! Try to buck up!' She bullied herself: 'Oh, don't be such a damned fool! What's the matter with you? You love him, and you're going away with him for a while. That's all. It's perfectly simple ——'

She tried again, passionately, desperately, to *see* him. She felt that if she could only see him, if merely for an instant, she would be all right. It was this awful sense of going towards a shadow-person, a figure in a mist ——

A church bell chimed out. One stroke.

She started a little. Her heart felt as if it were an iron pendulum, swinging furiously, beating her, bruising her. Half-past three! She should have been there fifteen minutes ago! Oh, come on — quick! — do something! She must do something ——

Her thoughts turned — fled involuntarily, impetuously — to the others, to Robin and Ricky, Boots and Mimsy. She could see *them* plainly enough, even without closing her eyes. They were vivid: their faces, their voices. Vivid; and, all at once, infinitely precious! The Kiplings —— She suddenly hugged them tight, clung to them. She thought, with an overwhelming surge of relief: 'I can go back to them if I want to!' She saw them as she had left them, in the living-room; and everything about them, the very walls themselves, seemed imbued with a warm, palpable, indefinable beauty: the jumble of books, books they had read together — the shabby friendliness of the chairs — the striped cushions — the firelight on the yellow-rimmed dishes — they all leaped to her remembrance; and other things, too, all sorts of things that came before her in abrupt, irrelevant flashes: the dilapidated red blanket, that had been Marie Antoinette's robe, draped over the ottoman — the Duke's medal above the desk — the pictures, knights in a forest, Roundheads — the Coronation mugs on the mantel — old, familiar, curiously intimate things! And she could go back to them if she wanted to! Yes! Yes! She would go back! Already she seemed to be halfway there: running, holding out her arms to them — to the Kiplings, to all the old, familiar, beloved things!

Then, in an instant, she stopped short. Go back! She suddenly flinched from the idea. Oh — *no!* Of course not! It was impossible! How could she have thought of such a thing! They had all said good-bye to her; her trunk was packed; Clumington had been broken with —— She couldn't go back now! It would be like trailing out on to the stage after a big, and final, scene. It would be ridiculous, humiliating! 'I've come home again because I suddenly remembered the — the Coronation mugs!' Oh, of *course* not! Don't be such an idiot...

An airplane came zooming over the city. It was silverish; it moved like a stiff-winged bird against the sun. The gleam of it caught her eye. She looked up, gripping the valise with one hand and clutching the magazines and chocolates with the other. She watched it blankly for a moment; then ——

Flying — Rand had said they might fly part of the way.

It was zooming off again, farther, farther ——

Flying over mountains. What would it be like?

She had never been in a plane. Funny! How was it she hadn't? But then there were hundreds of things she had never done: hundreds, thousands ——

She felt, all at once, a great rage flare up within her. She turned on herself; she taunted herself, furiously, bitterly: 'And you never will do them! You're a fool — a coward! Look at you now! Standing here — wanting to crawl home — *slobbering!* Because you've funked! That's what you've done! You've let it all be spoiled! Your adventure — that was going to be so brave, so beautiful — it's spoiled now! It's lost! Because you're a coward — a *coward* ——'

She suddenly gritted her teeth. She stepped forward, flung out her arm.

'Taxi! Taxi ——'

A car swerved in towards her.

She jerked the door open herself, and thrust her valise in ahead of her.

'The Blackmore Hotel,' she snapped.

Boots, who had been sitting alone in the living-room, said: 'She's gone away,' and sat down again, wrapped in gloom.

Henry looked mystified. 'Gone away ——'

'Yeah. With Rand Tarvin.'

There was a pause; then,

'You — you mean she — they've got married?'

He warmed up a trifle. 'Say! d'you think you'd catch him marrying anybody!' He snorted.

Henry said: 'Oh ——'

There was another pause.

Boots studied his feet, gloweringly. 'I always thought Poppet had more sense!' He flung the words out; he sounded as if he would have liked to bash Poppet's head in. 'It makes you sick!' he said.

Henry stood motionless. He looked white and stricken. After a moment or two he managed, with a great effort: 'She — she loves him — I suppose ——'

'It makes you *sick!*' Boots repeated savagely.

Henry left; and later on Daphne dropped in.

She sank on to the couch, looking flawlessly groomed and exquisitely at peace with the world. 'Helene's throwing a party to-night, and she wants us to go. You will, won't you, Boots? I feel just *like* a party. You know how you feel just in the *mood* for a thing sometimes. Johnny and Gwen said they'd ——'

He interrupted her brusquely. 'No. I can't.'

'Oh, but, Boo-oots ——' She hesitated. 'What's the matter?'

'Poppet's gone away.'

'Has she? Where?'

'North Carolina. She's gone with Rand Tarvin.'

Daphne arrived at the correct conclusion with decidedly less prodding than usual. 'You mean ——? Oh, *Boots!*' She grew starry-eyed with interest. 'Not *really!*'

He felt a vague sense of irritation. 'Well,' he said.

She was enormously impressed. 'Oh, but how — how —— Of course I'm terribly broad-minded and all, I mean I'm not narrow-minded, I can't stand narrow-minded people — but Heavens!' She leaned forward; her voice lifted, eagerly, vivaciously: 'But how *awful*, Boots! I mean, everybody'll find out, won't they! You'll never be able to keep it ——'

He told her frigidly: 'Poppet doesn't give a damn who finds out. You don't suppose she's scared, do you!'

'Oh, but, Boots!' — she was positively sparkling now — 'it'll just *ruin* her reputation! I mean, *won't* it! Doing a thing like that! Everybody'll talk. They'll all be so sort of terribly — I mean the narrow-minded ones. Heavens! my mother'll ——'

He suddenly flared up. 'Say!' he demanded, 'what the hell's your mother got to do with it!' His voice was large, indignant. 'It's none of her business, is it! If Poppet wants to go away, it's nothing to do with your mother! It's her own business! She can go away with anybody she wants to go away with! Your mother hasn't got anything to do with it! And nobody else has, either! They can just shut up — see! They can just keep their snoots out of Poppet's business!'

He glared at her, threateningly.

10

Every one except Boots had accepted Marcia Rolf's invitation to spend the week-end at her camp. Boots was elsewhere engaged. He and Hilda had — by dint of speaking without being spoken to, interrupting testimony, glaring, snorting with disgust, and otherwise upsetting the order of the court — managed to procure for themselves a month's sentence, enriched by a great deal of valuable publicity. When reporters, attracted by their somewhat colorful conduct before the bench, came flocking on to the scene, they made the best of the opportunity by giving out long, dramatic interviews, in which they hurled spirited accusations against various persons of social, political, and military prominence, and advocated all their most cherished causes, from the League of Nations to Birth Control, with the utmost eloquence and vigor. What with one thing and another, they managed to create a gratifying stir. Their pictures appeared in all the newspapers, labeled, impressively, 'Young Anarchists'; and Hilda's mother, a mild-mannered lady who had been running for the presidency of her bridge club, was overwhelmingly defeated; and several of the less important individuals who had been assailed in the interviews wrote furious letters to the press denying that they were cowards, or morons, or were bloated with ill-gotten gains, whereupon several other individuals wrote back insinuating that they were; and Boots received an anonymous, furtively worded epistle which began, 'Comrade: We feel that you are ready to join with us. If, when you are at liberty again, you will come to 191 Bailey Road, and knock five times, very slowly, on the back door ——' And Hilda received a proposal of marriage from an elderly gentleman who was, shortly afterwards, returned by his wife to the private sanatorium from which he had made a brilliant, if brief, escape...

It was almost noon when they reached the camp.

Snow had fallen lightly the previous evening: the bare woods, closing in about the cabin, were smeared with it, and the hills, swelling up behind the woods, were white against the calm grayness of the sky.

Robin and Denis had been sitting in the rumble-seat of one of the cars, wrapped in rugs. They climbed out now, and stamped about, stretching themselves.

Marcia turned off her engine. 'Hello, you two! Are you frozen?'

'Oh, no! It was great! Where's the pond? You said there was a pond ——'

'There is. Down there, to the right. At the end of the path.'

Robin went racing off to investigate, while Ricky got out, carrying an armful of phonograph records; and then Mimsy, in mauve-and-gray tweeds, with fringed gauntlets and a felt hat slouched over her eyes.

A rotund young man, bearing an ukulele, was the last to emerge. 'Ah!' he observed. 'Miles from civilization! How restful! Are there any wolves? —'

They moved about, pulling bags out of the cars. Their breath hung on the still air; their feet sank through the snow into thick, spongy layers of dead leaves...

'Oh!' Robin's voice came ringingly out of the wood. 'It's all frozen! You can slide on it!'

Denis, gathering up a stack of magazines, suggested: 'Somebody'd better go and look after her. She'll probably fall in ——'

The door of the cabin was thrown open; and the figure of one of the two servants who had been sent on earlier in the morning was silhouetted for an instant against the red blaze of a fire.

Ricky went over to the path. 'Robin! —'

She reappeared in a moment or two. She came lightly through the brown-and-white trees, sniffing the air, bare headed, with her hands thrust into the pockets of her leather jacket.

'Isn't this the loveliest place!'

'Mm! Isn't it.'

Without pausing she bent down and scooped up a handful of snow. She began eating it. 'Remember how the Duke used to scrape it off the window-sills for us and mix it with sugar? —'

The main room of the cabin possessed an air of nonchalance, of picturesque casualness, which, when examined, was perceived to be as deliberately contrived, and as rigidly maintained, as the impeccable order of Mrs. Rolf's drawing-room. A narrow gallery, on to which opened the doors of the upstairs bedrooms, ran around two sides of it; and in the third wall, to the left of the entrance, was the stone fireplace, flanked with windows that held still, sharply etched pictures of the winter woods. A table was already set for lunch; and the servant who had appeared in the doorway was bending over the hearth with another armful of birch logs...

Marcia, drawing off her gloves, assigned rooms. 'And don't knock your oil-stove over, Robin. They explode.'

'Quite right,' corroborated the rotund young man. 'During the late war my uncle established a brilliant reputation for himself by hurling oil-stoves at the enemy ——'

Upstairs, Robin squatted on the end of the bed, with the window in front of her. She leaned forward a little; she breathed against the pane and drew a rabbit's head, with the tip of her finger, on the patch of mist. Then she folded her hands in her lap and sat motionless, staring outside. A sheet of gray, and the brown-and-white trees lifting themselves against it. That was all: there might have been nothing else, anywhere, in the whole world. From the other end of the cabin you would be able to see the hills, perhaps. Denis's room was at the other end. Denis —— She felt a shadow, a sudden coldness, fall on her heart. She thought, hurriedly: 'Oh, never mind! I won't think about it now.' But her eyes grew moody, troubled. He had told her about it while they were driving down here this morning. They had been passing a farmhouse, a red one, set on a white ridge against the pallid sky. She remembered looking at it, then turning quickly as he spoke. 'Meredith's rather thinking of sending me back to New York, Robin — in the spring. He wants me to manage the publicity there.' She had repeated his words: 'New York' — and, after a momentary pause — 'Oh, but, Denis ——' Then stopped short, because she had realized that he was pleased. 'You wouldn't mind, would you?' He had, stressing the fact that the move, were they to make it, would be one of no great distance, pointed out: 'You'd be able to run back whenever you felt like it, of course. And Ricky and the others could drop over ——' She had said: 'Yes ——' Yes, to be sure. They could visit one another. Visit! How funny! 'Dear Ricky, will you come and visit us next month?' She had listened with a queer sense of blankness as he had gone on talking, about places, and people — old friends — the Herons — Phil Matthews — somebody called Boggles — people who, although nothing but names to her, belonged in his life, who had known him before she had known him, who had shared things with him, who were woven, intimately and inextricably, into the pattern of his past. 'The Herons ——?' she had repeated. 'Yes. Every one turns up at their studio on Sunday evenings. They're corkers! You'd like them, Robin!' She had said, 'I am sure I should, Denis,' and they had sat silent then, for several minutes, with the wind stinging their faces and the white countryside flowing past them. After a while he had remarked: 'I suppose we'd better get a furnished place here, hadn't we? There's no use loading ourselves up with a lot of stuff if we're ——' No, of course not: she had nodded; and then, quite suddenly, without any conscious premeditation, she had made a further suggestion: 'Would it be better, Denis, to wait and get married in the spring?' There were reasons, obvious ones, why it *would* be better. There was Poppet, to begin with — Poppet especially. She would, presumably, be home then; and Mimsy would no doubt have come to some sort of decision in regard to Charles Widderness; and the lease on the apartment — which would be cumbersomely large for three people — would have expired; and the Tavern, also, would be definitely finished with, since Marcia had just completed arrangements to sell it some time in April. Everything — all this present clutter of small complications and uncertainties would be settled then: the stage would be clear. 'What do you think, Denis?' She had turned to him; and, after hesitating for a moment, he had said, 'Why — yes. Perhaps it would ——' And the instant he had agreed she had been filled, capriciously, with a passionate disappointment; she had wanted him to exclaim: 'No! of course not, Robin!' — wanted him to fling aside her proposal, impatiently and roughly...

She told herself, sitting here now by the window: 'But it *will* be better.' Of course! Any one could see that. And as to the other, as to going away ——

She became aware, all at once, that they were calling her: 'Robin! Aren't you coming, Robin ——'

She got up slowly. She went over to the dressing-table and leaned forward, powdering her nose with a somewhat grubby puff that she had pulled out of her pocket. Her eyes, looking back at her from the mirror, were solemn, troubled. She said irritably: 'Oh, for Heaven's sake ——' What was the use of getting upset about it now! Meredith might change his mind: something — all sorts of things — might happen before next spring.

She shoved the puff into her pocket again, and went out on to the gallery. The fire was blazing lustily below. More dishes were being carried in; and there was a savory smell of cooking food on the air. Some one had started the phonograph. The rotund young man (who, by dint of close association with a coterie of rather witty people, managed to produce trivial but scintillating little books which were not so much novels as artful compilations of his friends' bon-mots) was sprawled on a couch, accompanying the record, more or less accurately, on his ukulele. Marcia was just going through a doorway, her orange sweater passing like a light along the dark woodwork; and Ricky was drawing chairs up to the table; and Mimsy and Denis were dancing together — at the farther end of the room, against the tree-streaked windows. Their figures caught her attention; and she paused for a moment on the gallery and looked down, watching them. She liked to watch them dancing: they were both so beautiful — and moved together so beautifully. She, Robin, made too short a partner for Denis: she always had to stand on tiptoe, straining up, her face squashed against his coat. But Mimsy was tall, just the right height for him. When he spoke to her, as he was doing now, he had barely to move his head to meet her eyes...

After lunch Marcia tentatively suggested a walk:

'The Varneys won't be here until about four, so we've time to go over to Brigand's Hill, if you'd like to. Who would?'

'Me,' Robin said promptly. Brigand's Hill. It sounded interesting. Perhaps there were caves there, or something. She got up and began pulling on her leather jacket; but Mimsy, stretching herself luxuriously beside the fire, decided:

'I think I'll stay here, Marcia. I'm in a lazy mood.'

'Ditto,' Denis echoed.

Robin looked up. 'Oh — but — please! *Do* come!'

He shook his head. 'I'd better not. I'd only fall asleep, and you'd have to lug me along under your arm ——'

He was, obviously, immovable; and realizing it she felt an abrupt slackening of interest in the walk. After all — Brigand's Hill — it would just be a *hill*, of course; just going along a path, with a lot of trees —— She stopped buttoning her jacket. 'Well, maybe I won't either, then. Maybe I'd better stay and — and write to Poppet.' Yes, to be sure! She ought to write to Poppet: she must tell her about Boots being in jail, and about the wedding being put off until spring...

Marcia observed pleasantly: 'You're nice ones to bring into the country!' — then, as Ricky, followed by the rotund young man, came into the room: 'I've been suggesting a walk, but these people want to loll round the fire. What about you, Ricky? Does a tramp appeal to you?'

'Sure,' he said. 'Where to?'

'Brigand's Hill. There's a rather nice trail leading up to it ——' She paused, a barely perceptible pause. 'And you, Guy?'

Something in her tone arrested Ricky's attention: something forced, a sort of brittle graciousness, as if she were extending, because obliged to do so, an invitation which she passionately desired to be refused.

But it wasn't refused. The rotund young man said: 'Oh, I'll jog along. There's going to be a hill in my next book, so I'd better see what they look like.'

She nodded. 'Fine. Then that'll be three of us ——'

But Ricky, alert to the undercurrents of the situation, was aware of a swift, sharp drop of disappointment in her voice. Yes — of course! If Guy had only preferred not to come, the walk would have been narrowed into an affair between Marcia and himself. He could understand her disappointment: he could, in fact, appreciate the quality of it with a rather uncomfortable acuteness — since some months ago he would have experienced very much the same sensation had the possibility of his being alone with her for an hour or two been dangled in front of him, and then abruptly snatched away. He could, blending the services of memory and intuition, estimate the emotions which this little incident must have occasioned within her. First, the sudden spring of hope — as Robin and the others had decided to remain here: a small, careful hope at its inception, but one which had grown larger and more intense each instant, until, when he had said 'Sure' — or whatever it was he had said, it had leaped out of her control, had gone flaring through her, wildly and brightly, like a flame; then the bitter necessity of having to include Guy in the invitation: 'And you, Guy?' and the taut uncertainty at that moment, with her heart entreating, commanding: 'Oh, don't! *Don't*' — and after that the harsh impact of his acceptance, the cold, thwarted, *bleak* feeling. Ah, he could remember! Once he had waited by the Tavern door for over an hour, meaning, when she emerged, to convey an impression of having just been passing; and then she had come out with some one else, had stepped into a car, and been driven off ruthlessly before his eyes.

And now ——

He was struck afresh by the irony of the situation: by the fact that he and Marcia should each have fallen in love with the other — but at different times.

He watched her turn, and go into her room for her coat. He felt sorry for her, and felt a certain admiration for the almost flawless poise with which she had masked her distress; but he was conscious that, had some one other than himself been the pivot of her emotions, he would have been able to sympathize and admire more graciously, because with a greater sense of detachment. There was something embarrassing, even a little irritating, in being forced to witness the tortuous, and utterly futile, progress of the belated complement to a passion that had died within himself some months ago...

Robin seated herself at the table. It was very quiet in the room — no sound but the intermittent cracklings of the fire, and Denis's voice reading something to Mimsy. Through the windows the trees were quiet, and the sky, and the pale hills in the distance. So profound was the stillness that if a bird were to have flown past, or a withered leaf were to have fallen through the air, it would, somehow, have seemed odd — almost phenomenal, as if something were to have flown or fallen in a picture.

She propped her feet up on the chair-rung, and leaned forward.

'Dear Poppet ——'

There was plenty to write about: important matters, such as the possibility of Denis's being sent to New York, and a lot of inconsequential, gossipy little things — the janitor's dog having puppies, and Mrs. Bird's latest flare-up with Mrs. McMasters, and her new coat, with the red-lined cape that sprang out brightly from her shoulders when she walked in the wind; and there were the usual comments to be made on Poppet's own activities: 'Your trip to Chimney Rock sounded great' — things of that sort, remarks carefully constructed so as to exclude all reference to any one but Poppet herself...

She scrawled her name at the bottom of the third page; then read over what she had written. There was, as usual, nothing of Rand Tarvin. Not once was he mentioned, or even alluded to obliquely. He never was — in the letters she received as well as in those she sent; for although Poppet wrote vivaciously about places she had been to, people she had encountered, books she had read — for all that her words conveyed she might have been off by herself on a conventional vacation. There was something stupid in the situation, something rigidly artificial. It seemed to Robin that, instead of forming a link, their correspondence, by reason of its conspicuous omissions, merely served to accentuate the gap between them.

She thought now, as she had often thought before: 'If only I had said something at the *beginning* ——' That was what she ought to have done. Even if it had appeared brusque or presumptuous, she should have come right out with her questions, bang, at the start! 'How are you and Tarvin getting on, Poppet? Are you really happy? What are you *thinking?*' These were the things that she wanted to write. But in her first letter she had deliberately avoided writing them — she didn't quite know why, except that she had felt a certain awkwardness, a certain shyness; had had a fear of assuming, at the outset, an attitude that would embarrass Poppet, or antagonize her. She had written of other things instead — trivial things; and in return Poppet had sent back a lengthy description of the weather, and the journey, and the view from her bedroom window.

She could see now that the whole tone of their intercourse had been determined by those letters. It was as if, in beginning as they had, they had committed themselves irrevocably to this studied casualness, these careful silences...

She became conscious again of the room, and of Denis's voice.

She looked up.

Mimsy was seated in a tall-backed chair by the fire. She was very still. Her fingers were laced together in her lap; her head was set lightly and charmingly against the yellow cushions behind her. She had taken her tweed jacket off and was wearing a thin, narrow-pleated blouse. As she breathed, the pleats moved a trifle, opened up very delicately over the curve of her breast, then flattened themselves, then opened again. Denis, slouched back next to her, paused to turn a page, then went on reading. His voice sounded low, effortless, comfortable...

Robin put her pencil down, and listened. What was he reading? She couldn't make the words out from here. They were all blurred; they all slid into one another mysteriously. After a while she got up. There was a footstool near Mimsy's chair, and she crossed the room to it and sat down, quietly, so as not to disturb them.

Mimsy glanced round. 'Hello ——'

Denis stopped.

'Oh — go on, please! I didn't mean to interrupt.'

Mimsy moved her chair a little. 'Here — come up closer.' She spoke to Denis: 'Let's start this one over for her, shall we? It's "Saki," Robin. You'll like him.'

Denis turned back a page or two.

'Want a cushion, Robin?'

'No, thanks. This is fine.' She propped her elbows on her knees, and cupped her chin in her hands. The fire's heat felt good against her face. She could smell the logs burning; she could smell, too, the faint flowery fragrance that belonged to Mimsy — a fragrance that seemed to spring not from a scented handkerchief, or scented hair, but from her whole person, to emanate from everything she wore, from her very skin. She supposed the same perfume must be used by other people in the world; but it had become, to her, so intimate and inextricable a part of Mimsy's individuality that she felt she would be quite startled if she were ever to detect it on anybody else...

Denis had begun to read again. The words passed lazily through the quietness. A log crackled. Some sparks leaped from it into the air, and whirled about for a moment like a swarm of jeweled flies.

She sat motionless, listening, and laughing now and then with Mimsy.

A page was turned:

'... and became interested in a case of miniatures. "That?" said the Princess; "that is the old Princess Lorikoff. She lived in Millionaya Street, near the Winter Palace, and was one of the Court Ladies of the Old Russian school. Her knowledge of people and events was extremely limited; but she used to patronize every one who came in contact with her. There was a story that when she died and left the Millionaya for Heaven she addressed Saint Peter in her formal staccato French: 'Je suis la Princesse Lor-i-koff ——'"'

Robin looked attentive. Je — that meant *I*. Je suis ——

'"Il me donne grand plaisir à faire votre connaissance. Je vous en prie me présenter au Bon Dieu ——"'

Bon Dieu — that was *God* —— She watched Mimsy's face. She was smiling. It must be funny, of course. Something funny ——

'"Saint Peter made the desired introduction, and the Princess addressed le Bon Dieu: "Je suis la Princesse Lor-i-koff. Il me donne grand plaisir à faire votre connaissance. On a souvent parlé de vous a l'église de la rue Million."'

Denis looked up. He and Mimsy both laughed.

'Did you get it all right, Robin?'

'Oh — yes — most of it. Yes, thanks.' She laughed, too — quickly, brightly.

He went on reading again.

She sat quite still on her stool. She wasn't listening now. She was thinking: she was wondering why she had felt that sudden — what was it? Something queer, *painful.* They had been sharing a joke with one another, and she had been on the outside, unable to join them. They had laughed together —— What was there about people laughing together — quietly like that, intimately — that seemed to bring them so very close, to shut out everybody and everything around them? If Mimsy had said, 'That's rather beautiful, isn't it?' or, 'That's tremendously interesting!' — something *serious* — it would have been different. But they had *laughed* — together — their eyes meeting —— It had been, for that moment, as if they had belonged to one another, and as if she, Robin, although sitting here between them, had been infinitely far away...

When Denis finished the story, Mimsy exclaimed: 'Oh, do go on! Don't you want some more, Robin? Don't you like him?'

She said, eagerly: 'Oh, I *do!* I like him awfully! And that piece about the — the Princess — you know — it *was* good, wasn't it? I did think it was good!'

Ricky went into his room. His face was tingling. It had been cold out — and lovely. He liked these still, pale, shadowless days. He took his coat off and noticed, as he did so, something in one of the pockets. Oh, of course — letters. He remembered picking them up this morning on his way out of the apartment. He went over to the window. Mr. Barrett Kipling; Barrett Kipling again — Boots's mail was becoming more prodigious than ever; Miss Pauline Kipling; Richard Kipling, Esquire ——

The familiar square, brown envelope. Reviews.

He held it for a moment, unopened. He thought: 'Now, look here! it doesn't matter a damn *what* they say!' He always told himself that: his hands always trembled.

There were several newspaper cuttings inside. The first was from the Tuscago 'Herald' — signed by somebody called Myrtle L. Robinson. Where was Tuscago? Who was

Myrtle L. Robinson? 'This young man shows great promise ——' He wished people wouldn't refer to him as 'this young man.' She seemed to like the book, although in a somewhat passive fashion and for no particular reasons. '"In the Night" stands out as the most distinctive ——' 'In the Night'! Absurd! It did nothing of the sort! How on earth could she have thought such a thing! Why, it was one of the failures! There were two lines in it that were sheer tripe — worse than mediocre — *inexcusable!* He flinched every time he recalled them: he was amazed, ashamed, that he should ever have permitted himself to be even remotely satisfied with such stuff. The most distinctive —— He felt thoroughly upset. He wanted to say: 'But look here! it isn't distinctive at all! Can't you see how rotten those lines are? Can't you see how utterly I failed? —'

The second clipping was longer. It was indiscriminate and flowery and ardent. 'Here is a gifted young poet who has delved deep into the rich caverns of the human heart, who has gone plunging among the silver stars ——' Oh, my God! He felt himself turning red; he felt embarrassed, *humiliated.* He screwed the paper up quickly and threw it away.

There was an important review next — one he had been waiting for. His book was discussed with several others that had been recently published. Somebody else's came first; then — yes — here! 'Richard Kipling ——' His heart leaped into his throat; the printed words spun about in front of him like black dust. '— While showing a certain delicacy of perception there is a lack of organic unity in the body of his verse, a straining after abstractions which calls for more definite statement and a more scrupulous technique than Mr. Kipling is at present master of.' Words like a knife in his heart! That quick, deep pain —— Well, what had he *expected* him to say? Here is a John Keats? A brief comparison of his book with the preceding one. Ah, it was better than his! The knife turning in his heart. Well, why not? Probably they were all better than his; probably —— Then new words: praise, appreciation. Oh, lovely praise!

falling about him — falling about him softly and brightly! One of the poems was quoted: 'To Iseult.' 'The sea comes whispering round your feet ——' How startling, to stumble suddenly like this upon his own things! How inexplicably different from all the other words on the paper those words appeared! He read them eagerly, anxiously — afraid, as he was always afraid when he read something over, that he would discover a flaw that he had never noticed before. But there wasn't a flaw; there was nothing that he would have changed. It was good — *good!* He found himself trembling a little with the intensity of his relief. Then a few more sentences, a gathering together of threads. '— Reveals himself as some one most certainly worth watching.'

He went on standing there by the window; and his excitement gradually subsided, leaving him thoughtful — moody. 'Worth watching.' They were always saying things like that. 'Will watch his development — will watch his work with interest.' It gave him a queer, rather harassed feeling. This multitude of strange shadowy people watching — analyzing — discussing his potentialities, predicting his future. It was as if there were eyes all about him — *staring* at him. He wanted, sometimes, to say: 'Oh, don't look at me! Don't talk about me! I know what I am trying to do! I know where I am trying to go!' He even wished sometimes — just now and then — that he had kept his poems completely to himself, that he had gone on working as he used to work, quietly, secretly, with no one to confuse him with censure or applause...

He went out on to the gallery. The room below seemed, at first glance, to be deserted; then he saw that Marcia was there — by one of the windows, silhouetted against the twilit trees. She was standing quite still. She looked — what was the word? Elegant. Yes. He wondered suddenly wherein lay the difference between her elegance and Mimsy's. They were alike, and yet unlike. Perhaps Marcia's was an elegance of training, tradition; Mimsy's a certain elegance of spirit.

He came down the stairs.

She turned, quickly.

'The Varneys are rather late, aren't they?'

She said: 'Yes. I hope they haven't lost themselves.'

The Varneys. Jessamine Varney. A nice name. People *ought* to have nice names. He went over to the fire, and held his hands out to it. The light was fading now. The woods were lovely through the windows, blurred, and mauve-colored...

His eyes returned to Marcia. She was still standing there, motionless, just beyond the red light of the fire. He thought, suddenly: 'Suppose I were to ask her to marry me.' He toyed with the idea. Suppose he were —— He would be able to leave Meredith's, to travel, to listen to music, look at pictures — have all the time in the world to do with as he pleased. No more routine; no more small, chafing lacks —— He could understand how Mimsy must feel in regard to what Charles Widderness was offering her. After all — these things, this wide bright leisure...

He stared at Marcia, contemplatively. It was an excellent setting for a proposal. Twilight, firelight. Probably just what she was thinking. She was standing there — *waiting*. He could almost feel her waiting! He would kiss her; he would say 'Will you marry me, Marcia?' and she would say 'Yes.' That was how it would go. There wasn't the faintest shadow of uncertainty, of mystery. He knew she would say 'Yes.' She was waiting to say it — now — this very moment. Knowing that, he felt a sense of profound indifference...

A sound had grown gradually into the quietness. A car was coming through the woods. For one instant, as it turned into the clearing before the cabin, its headlights flashed across the windows, and the harsh radiance struck Marcia, lit up the vivid orange of her sweater, lit up her face — pale, taut, unguarded.

He thought: 'Oh, good Lord!' — and felt, all at once, acutely distressed. He wanted to say: 'I'm sorry! I'm awfully sorry! But what on earth can be done about it?' He said, instead: 'Would you like me to light some candles for you, Marcia?'

Robin came downstairs; and then Denis.

The car had stopped outside.

The door was thrown open: a small hubbub of greetings, laughter. Marcia's voice rising up gayly: 'My dear! I was beginning to think ——'

Introductions. 'Jessamine Varney ——'

Jessamine Varney: small, slight, with slanting green eyes that might have belonged to a wood-nymph.

'How d'you do ——'

'How d'you do ——'

The familiar leap of interest. What was she like?

'Yes, it is rather, isn't it! Can I take your bag? —'

Who was she? *What was she like?*

II

Poppet's return was unannounced and unpretentious. She simply opened the door, one evening when they were having a party, and walked in, followed by a taxi-driver with her suitcase.

'*Poppet* ——'

Somebody stopped the phonograph.

'Put it there,' she said. 'Thanks.' She turned to them: 'Hello, you all. Have you any change, Ricky?'

Robin picked up her long taffeta skirt and came rushing across the room. 'Oh, Poppet! why didn't you ——'

'Let you know? But I thought you liked surprises.' She kissed Robin, and then Mimsy; and while Ricky was attending to the driver, said: 'Hello, Boots. Hello, Denis' — her voice, her whole manner, deliberately and even bluntly forestalling any effusive greetings on their part.

The door was closed again: there was a slight pause — a moment of awkwardness, of uncertainty. Mimsy was the first to adjust herself to the situation. She slipped her arm through Poppet's and commenced introducing people to her:

'This is Jessamine Varney. Our sister, Jessamine. And you've met Charles, haven't you? And Mr. Graham ——'

Poppet said: 'How d'you do. How d'you do — You won't think me awfully rude if I turn in right away, will you? But I'm dog-tired. Hello, Henry — I didn't see you there. Would you mind bringing my bag along, Ricky?' She went into her own room; and Robin dashed down the hall towards the linen-closet to get sheets and blankets and fresh towels; and Mimsy said, 'Look after things for a few minutes, Denis, will you?' and followed Robin; and Boots followed Ricky...

Poppet was standing by the bureau, peeling her gloves off. She might, from the air of detachment which she wore, have been standing in a hotel room while a porter brought her luggage in for her. Ricky put the suitcase on a chair, and unstrapped it. They were both silent for a moment or two; then,

'Did you come by train?'

She nodded. 'It was wretchedly crowded.'

'I suppose so. Every one back for New Year's.'

'Yes — I suppose so.'

Boots, stationed in the doorway, asked: 'Don't you want something to eat, Poppet? There's a lot of stuff ——'

'No, I don't think so, thanks — or' — she half-turned to him — 'I might have some milk. If you've got any.' He hurried across the hall; and she threw her gloves down on the bureau, and began to unfasten the leather belt of her coat.

There was another silence.

'Well — how are you all?'

'Oh, fine,' Ricky said. 'How're you?'

'Oh, fine ——'

Mimsy came in; and then Robin, a little breathless, with her arms full of bedclothes. 'We'll have it made up in a jiffy, Poppet. Don't you want a bath?'

She shook her head. 'I'm too tired for anything now ——'

She pulled her coat off and went over to the closet and hung it up, still with that air of detachment so that it seemed almost odd that she should know, without any preliminary investigating, where the closet was...

Robin spread sheets and blankets on the bed, her taffeta skirt rustling crisply as she moved; Mimsy put a fresh slip on the pillow; Boots returned with a glass of milk, presented it to Poppet, and then went and stood near the door next to Ricky and tried to think of something to say. There must be something, hundreds of things — but he couldn't seem to lay his tongue on any of them. What *did* people say on such occasions, under such circumstances? 'Have you had a nice time, Poppet?' — would it be all right to ask that? But suppose she hadn't had a nice time. Suppose she'd had a rotten one. He gazed at her, earnestly and carefully, trying to determine from her appearance what sort of time she had had so that he would know what sort of remarks it would be appropriate for him to make. She was sitting down now, drinking the milk. She had taken her hat off and shoved her hair behind her ears: she looked grimy, and heavy-eyed. That was all. He felt baffled instead of enlightened; he had expected — he wasn't quite sure what it was that he had expected, but something more *definite.* Depression, or anger, or bravado; even something dramatically tragic, perhaps...

He moved uneasily. He asked, his voice striking stiltedly across the silence: 'It's sort of cold out, isn't it?'

'Yes, it is rather.'

Somebody had started the phonograph again in the living-room, and the music came flaring along the hall now, with voices, and laughter.

Poppet put the glass down. 'Look here, I do wish you'd go back to your party. I didn't mean to interrupt everything like this.'

'Oh, that's all right, Poppet ——'

But, 'Please,' she insisted. 'There isn't anything to do here. Really there isn't.'

Since this was becoming embarrassingly obvious, Ricky and Boots said good-night; but Mimsy lingered for a moment, the light from the bed-lamp sliding across her smooth hair, across the pale, sleek folds of her satin gown.

'You're quite sure ——'

'Quite, thanks. I'm going to turn in right away.'

Mimsy went out; and Robin stretched the quilt over the blankets, and flattened the sheet back, and pummelled the pillow. 'There! That's done.' She straightened herself.

Poppet was bending forward, unlacing her shoes. She glanced up and said: 'Thanks very much, Robin. And now you run along, too ——'

Robin stood motionless. She wanted to say something. Why couldn't she think of something to say? What was the matter? What had happened? She and Poppet were close together here, in the same room, as they had been innumerable times before, but there was no sense of contact now, no *rapprochement* between them. She felt as if she couldn't get to her; she felt almost as she used to feel when Poppet was on the stage and the rest of them in the audience: as if she were moving on a slightly different, curiously inaccessible, plane of existence...

She went slowly towards the door. When she reached it, she paused, then turned abruptly. 'It's — it's awfully nice to have you home again, Poppet.'

'Thank you,' Poppet said.

She came back again later on, and twisted the doorknob quietly. The room was dark, the window half-open, and the curtains blowing a little. Holding her dress close so that it shouldn't rustle, she went over to the bed. Poppet was asleep, huddled up, with one arm curved about her head and her face pressed deeply into the pillow.

It had snowed during the night; and the sunshine seemed to strike the snow now and leap up again with an intensified brilliance. The kitchen was full of it: the trayful of glasses by the sink, and the stacks of yellow-rimmed dishes, glittered and gleamed; the flying curtains were like banners; the jar of marmalade on the table was a thing of beauty, glowing amber, intricately patterned with thin winding strips of peel...

The apartment was very quiet. Ricky and Boots had been gone for twenty minutes or so; Poppet was still asleep.

Robin threw some more soap-powder into the water, and slushed it up into a bright froth; and Mimsy moved about behind her, drying things and putting things away, her lilac-colored smock vivid against the white walls. They weren't talking much — just as no one had talked much during breakfast. They were each perfectly aware of how the other's thoughts were running: Poppet — why had Poppet come home, was she happy or unhappy, what was she going to do now that she was here? Their heads were full of such questions; but, since neither of them was any wiser than the other in regard to the answers, there seemed to be no particular point in discussing them.

Robin plunged another stack of plates into the dishpan. She would call Marcia up when she was through, and tell her that she wouldn't be at the Tavern to-day. She would stay here, of course. Poppet might want her for something; and even if she didn't it would look more — more gracious than going off as if nothing had happened. Going off —— She remembered, abruptly, the Widdernesses' tea. To be sure! It was this afternoon. A very pretentious affair, with an imported marquise as guest of honor — and one to which, for the first time, and much to Mimsy's gratification, she and Ricky and Boots had received invitations. She had bought a new dress for it under Mimsy's supervision; and Ricky was going to get the necessary time off from the office; and Boots, after a great deal of eloquent persuasion, had at last consented to cut a lecture and permit himself to be led forth to drink the tainted tea of the rich. And now — Poppet was home.

She turned round quickly. 'I say, Mimsy! we'll be able to take Poppet along with us this afternoon, won't we?'

'This afternoon?'

'To the Widdernesses'.'

Mimsy didn't answer for a moment; then, 'I'm — afraid not, Robin.'

'But we can't all go off and leave her!' Robin protested. 'The very first day she's home! It'd look awful. Couldn't you explain to Mrs. Widderness? Wouldn't she ——'

'No,' Mimsy said. 'I'm afraid she wouldn't.'

She stood motionless, the soap dripping off her hands. 'You mean ——'

'That — don't you see, Robin? She wouldn't care to receive Poppet.'

'Oh ——' She felt startled for a moment; then, all at once, violently upset. Wouldn't care to receive her! Oh, really! Wouldn't she! She said: 'Well, I like that!' — her voice sharp with anger. 'If Poppet isn't good enough for her, she needn't have me either! And I guess Ricky and Boots ——'

Mimsy interrupted her: 'Look here, Robin' — she spoke quietly but crisply. 'It *isn't* pleasant, I'm quite aware of that. But we've got to face the situation. There's no use being dramatic about it. This sort of thing's going to happen a lot — it's bound to. Don't you realize that?' She waited for some response, but Robin merely thrust her chin out farther. 'Poppet knew it would,' Mimsy reminded her, 'before she left. She said she didn't mind — perhaps she doesn't. I don't know, I'm sure. But we may as well accept the fact now that some people ——'

'But not her friends!' Robin disputed hotly. 'Not people who *know* her!' Of course not! It was absurd! Poppet wasn't a criminal; she wasn't — *wicked!* Anybody ought to be able to see that! They *must* see it!

Mimsy came back to the sink for another glass. She looked grave, and troubled. 'You don't suppose I shall enjoy having her cut any more than you, Robin!'

'Well, you sound pretty calm about it ——'

She said, quickly: 'It's because I don't see how we can help by making a fuss. You break certain rules, and there are certain consequences. That's inevitable. It's simply a question, I suppose, of weighing the consequences against whatever you wish to break the rules for. Poppet seemed to do that; and apparently she decided that Rand Tarvin was more important than — Mrs. Widderness's teas.'

'Well — maybe he was!'

'Possibly,' Mimsy said, and put the glass away on a shelf.

Robin turned round and splashed her hands back into the water. She felt, still, deeply upset. She couldn't understand Mimsy — how she could remain so poised and so reasonable. It was impossible for her to view the situation like that: she had no sense of perspective in regard to it; it was all too vital, too close to her heart. Poppet wasn't just a person, a figure in a neatly drawn problem; she was *Poppet*, and it was astonishing, and painful, to think that there were people who were going to refuse to recognize her, to turn away from her as if she were something offensive...

Poppet got up a little later, and came wandering into the kitchen in her pajamas, with her hair on end. She sat on a tall stool by the table and toasted herself a slice of bread, while Mimsy made a fresh pot of coffee and Robin opened a jar of strawberry jam. They asked her if she had slept well, and she said yes; and they all remarked upon the excellence of the weather, and the depth of the snowfall, and the low altitude of an airplane that came flashing in front of the window. The conversation was desultory, and almost as labored as it had been the previous evening; and in a very short time it became quite evident that Poppet had no intention of discussing, or even alluding to, the reasons for her return. Once or twice they tried to maneuver her towards the subject; but she remained flatly unresponsive — so that, although they had supposed their tentative proddings to be executed with the utmost tact, they were made to appear crudely inquisitive against the smooth wall of her reticence. Her attitude baffled them, and distressed them. That air of detachment, almost of lethargy, which she had worn last night seemed more pronounced than ever this morning. It hung between them: a curious, intangible sort of barrier...

The telephone rang.

Mimsy excused herself, politely — as if Poppet were a guest.

Robin moved about, doing things. She put the ice-card in the window, and stood there for a moment, holding back the curtains. She wanted to say: 'But what is the matter, Poppet? Why won't you tell us about it? Why won't you belong to us?' Belong — that was it! Poppet didn't seem to belong to them now, to be *with* them, simply and completely, as she had always been before.

Robin made a sudden effort to reach her, to draw her back into that old intimacy: 'What are you going to do now you're here, Poppet? I mean, about your work?'

She glanced up from the toast she was buttering. 'I don't know. I shall have to look round a bit.'

'Do you think Clumington ——'

'No!' she said. 'No, certainly not!' It was the first time since her return that she had spoken with any vehemence.

They were both silent for a minute or two; then,

'I'll get something or other, I expect. If you won't mind putting up with me for a few days ——'

'Oh, of course not, Poppet! Of course not!' She wanted to shake her, wanted to cry: 'Don't be such an idiot! Don't be such a *damned* idiot ——'

Mimsy came in again. 'It was Ricky. He wanted to know if he was to meet us, or we him. I said he'd better come back here.'

There was another pause; then,

'Mrs. Widderness,' Robin explained casually, 'is having some sort of tea this afternoon. Mimsy's carting Ricky and Boots along with her.' She picked the coffee-pot up: 'Don't you want some more with your toast?'

'Thanks. Just half a cup. Why aren't you going?'

'Where?'

'To the tea.'

'Oh — I've a lot of ——'

'Weren't you invited?'

'Yes, but ——'

Poppet said: 'Look here, Robin! I hope to Heaven you're not going to start being silly about — things. Why shouldn't you go! Don't you think I'm capable of looking after myself?'

Robin stood in the middle of the room, red and embarrassed. 'But I — really, Poppet — I'd much *rather* ——'

'You accepted the invitation, didn't you?'

'Yes, only ——'

'Then, good Lord, *go!* Why on earth should you hang around here!' She sounded peremptory, angry.

Robin made a blundering effort to steady the moment, to smooth it down a little: 'You see, Mrs. Widderness — she didn't know you ——'

'It wouldn't,' Poppet said, 'have made the slightest difference if she had. Half a cup, please.'

Boots, at first, refused point-blank to be taken unless Poppet went also. He was very heated about the point. 'Why the hell should ——' 'Sh!' Robin implored. 'Not so *loud*, Boots!' And Mimsy told him: 'Well, you don't have to, of course, but from what she said this morning, she'll be more upset if you stay here than if you come.' He did go eventually, glowering, and wearing his second oldest suit — having refused to change into something more appropriate in case the action should be construed as a sign of subserviency to the sartorial standards of the Widdernesses.

While they were absent, Daphne called at the apartment.

She stared up, wide-eyed. 'Oh ——'

'Hello,' Poppet said easily.

Daphne's attitude appeared to be compounded of confusion, curiosity, awe, and a vague sense of superiority. 'Is Boots — are the others in?'

'Sorry, they're all out at present. D'you want to leave a message?'

'Well — yes, I guess so. I mean, some of us are getting up a sleigh-ride for to-night — all the snow, you know — and I wanted to know if they ——'

'Sure. I should think they'd be keen about it. Shall I tell them to call you up?'

'Well — yes, I guess that'd be all right.'

There was a slight pause; then Poppet inquired politely:

'You want all of them, you say?'

Daphne was obviously agitated.

'Well — yes. I mean ——' After floundering around for a few moments she let the words out in a confidential gush: 'I mean, I'd love to have you, too, Poppet, only — I wish there was more room, and all — only everybody's coming back to my place to eat, and my mother — you know ——'

'Exactly,' Poppet said.

It was the next week, on the Sunday after he had had dinner with them all, that Henry turned up with his surprising request for assistance in finding himself an apartment.

'A what, Henry?'

'An apartment — or a room — or something. You see, I'm going to live by myself.'

'You are!' They were all frankly astonished. Somehow it was difficult to visualize Henry against any background other than the massive, relative-infested house in which he had been born.

'I thought I'd like to, for a change,' he explained loosely and in rather a hurry, as if trying to forestall questions. 'D'you know of any place that would do?'

Ricky had heard of a studio that was to rent, on Gay's Wharf.

'A studio ——' Henry repeated.

'Yes, and it's swell down there! You'd like it! You look out over the harbor, with liners passing, and fruiters docking under your windows ——'

Robin was charmed with the idea. She said: 'Let's go and get it now!' So they all put their things on, bundled themselves into Henry's car, and drove across the city.

The studio was at the tip of the wharf: a sprawled-out, low-roofed room, with a kitchen alcove behind a black-and-silver screen, and a diminutive balcony that swayed dramatically when the wind touched it, and a very large, very spectacular bathroom with a brilliant red bath and walls that were decorated with a galaxy of pale, misshapen nymphs who looked rather like undressed charwomen. There were a great many vividly curtained windows, holding views of other wharves, and boats, and gulls against the sky; and there were a number of wide-seated chairs, as low-legged as Dachshunds and with scarcely any backs to them, and a bookcase like a flight of steps, and lamps and rugs with bright, angular patterns, and, over all, a fine layer of dust and a faint smell of fish...

The present occupant of the apartment — a dreamy-eyed lady, with swinging onyx ear-rings and felt slippers with holes in the toes, who was departing for Corsica in a week or two — pointed out this and that with vague flourishes of a jeweled hand: 'I'll leave the books, if you like, and the prints, and you dump the garbage there, and that's the ice-chest ——'

The Kiplings were captivated. 'It'll be so much more fun than living in an ordinary place, won't it, Henry!' They hurried about, inspecting things, picking things up; while Henry trudged after them, looking a trifle dazed.

'Where do you — would I sleep?' he asked politely.

The bed was pointed out to him: a large, square-shaped object rising some four or five inches above the floor.

'Down there!' he said.

After they had made a complete tour of inspection, he signed an eight-months' lease.

Robin beamed upon him. 'Aren't you thrilled! I am! You'll find us all coming down and parking with you, Henry!

'Oh, *do!*' he requested in an earnest voice. 'I wish you *would!*' He seemed quite alarmed at the prospect of being left alone in the place...

While Ricky was looking the books over, and Boots was behind the screen experimenting with the stove, and Mimsy and Robin were making inquiries about linen and china and the nearest restaurants, Poppet crossed the room to one of the windows and stood there motionless, staring out into the darkening harbor. After a minute or two Henry, with a slightly apologetic air, came up and stood beside her. A fishing-boat was turning in towards the wharf; a pale mist was curling over the sea...

'It's — sort of pretty, isn't it?' He sounded nervous. It was the first time, since her return, that he had spoken to her alone.

'Yes,' she said. 'Isn't it?'

They were both silent for a while, the voices of the others making a blurred pattern of sound behind them; then,

'Henry, you've had some kind of quarrel with your family, haven't you?'

He was obviously disconcerted by the question. 'A — a quarrel ——?'

'What was it about?' she asked.

He didn't answer.

'Me, wasn't it?'

He was still silent; then, 'No,' he said.

'Henry, you're telling a lie.'

He was terribly distressed at that; he breathed noisily, he stammered: 'Well — it was sort of about you; I mean ——'

'I'm sorry,' she said. And then, all at once, she became sharply angry: 'But why should you quarrel about me! How dare you, Henry! How dare you!'

And the next day Mimsy, upon returning from a luncheon-party, found a penciled note stuck conspicuously against one of the Coronation mugs on the mantel:

I can see that my being here is going to cause too many complications for every one concerned, so I'm clearing off. I've taken the money out of the teapot. Don't worry about me; I'll be all right, of course. Love — Poppet.

They were all profoundly upset. Poppet had run away from them! It was extraordinary; it was appalling! What had they done? What had they made her feel? She had, Mimsy reported, taken nothing but a suitcase with her; and Ricky remembered that there had been little more than five dollars in the teapot, so that unless she had some money of her own, which was doubtful, she couldn't have gone very far. But where — *where!* They sat up until two o'clock in the morning, telephoning people, searching for clues, formulating theories, and heaping coals of fire upon their own and one another's heads for having permitted Poppet to think whatever it was that she had thought...

In spite of all their agitated efforts, however, it was Henry who finally located her. While driving through the east end of the city late one afternoon, he caught a glimpse of a familiar green coat, but lost it again, almost immediately, in the shifting crowds. He drove around for over an hour, in and out of adjacent streets, but without any further success; so the next day he came back to the same neighborhood, and kept on coming back, doggedly, for almost a week. Then he saw her again, this time just emerging from a candy-shop. He drew the car up quickly, left it, and followed her — keeping well behind so that she shouldn't notice him. She walked some distance, turning a corner now and then; and eventually, halfway down a narrow side street, she entered a large, ramshackle house with a 'Rooms' sign hanging in one of the front windows between dirty lace curtains. He waited on the opposite pavement for twenty minutes or so, to make sure that she didn't come out again; and then he tore back to the Kiplings to report the discovery...

They were in the middle of dinner; but when he made his announcement they rose as one man, dashed outside, and scrambled into the car with him.

'You're sure, Henry! You're sure!'

'Oh, of *course!*'

'But didn't you speak to her? Didn't you tell her ——'

He said: 'She'd — she'd rather have you find her, I guess.'

When they came to the side street he stopped the car, and pointed the house out carefully: 'That big one, over there. Number eleven.' He refused to accompany them farther; so they left him on the pavement and made a rush for the house, as if there was some danger of its skipping off before they could reach it...

The door was opened by a dilapidated-looking woman with a coral-colored nose.

'Miss Kipling, please,' they demanded. 'We want to see Miss Kipling.'

The woman looked blank. 'There's nobody of that name here.'

'Oh, *yes!*' they insisted. 'A tall girl with black eyes ——' They described her impatiently.

The woman drew her brows together. 'Sounds like Miss Smith ——'

'Smith!' Ricky said. 'Yes, of course! That's it! May we see Miss Smith?'

They followed the woman up a darkish stairway, and jostled after her down the back hall. She stopped before the last door and rapped her knuckles against it.

'Yes?' Poppet's voice inquired.

The woman was about to say something; but the Kiplings, brushing her completely off the scene, flung the door open and burst into the room.

Poppet, wearing a sweater over her kimono, was sitting in a wooden rocking-chair with a bottle of milk beside her, on the washstand, and a packet of cheese crackers in her lap. She stared up at them for a moment, motionless, without a word. Then Boots roared: 'Poppet! you crazy fool ——' And, all at once, without any warning, they were laughing, the whole lot of them; laughing loudly, riotously, laughing and laughing — because it seemed so extraordinarily funny that Poppet should have tried to run away!

Mimsy reheated part of the dinner, and they sat down again at the table and plied Poppet with food and questions. Everybody was in a state of the utmost hilarity: they talked on top of one another, with their mouths full, rocking back and forth...

'But what did you *expect* to do, Poppet! How on earth did you think you could *possibly* ——'

'I don't know!' she kept on saying, between gales of laughter. 'I don't know ——'

And, '*Miss Smith!*' Boots shouted.

And, 'Did you *sell* the candy,' Mimsy wanted to know, 'or ——'

'No, no! I put it in boxes! Thousands and thousands of little white boxes! I sat in a room behind the store with a man called Bertie, and he sorted them, and I packed them ——'

'And going off without your rubbers!' Robin gasped. 'And without your toothbrush, and without your ——'

'Oh, wasn't it the silliest thing!' Poppet agreed. 'Wasn't it the *damndest* silly thing!' And then, quite suddenly, she began to cry — noisily, with her shoulders shaking and the tears pouring down her cheeks.

'Oh, *Poppet* ——'

'L-let — me d-do it!' she requested. 'I — I — want to! — and went on crying for several minutes.

The others sat silent, waiting for her to be through. They didn't look, and didn't feel, in the slightest concerned. She was getting rid of something, emptying it all out of herself: they understood perfectly. And she belonged to them again — that was the big thing, the realization that lay warmly and brightly in their hearts; Poppet was one of them again, in the old close way.

Robin was squatting on the end of the bed; Poppet was lying back, her hands clasped loosely behind her head and her knees drawn up under the bedclothes. After all the hilarity and agitation of the evening she was very still now, and grave; her hair was black against the pillow, her face pale and rather thin against the blackness of her hair...

Robin said: 'But why didn't you *talk* to us, Poppet? Why didn't you explain things?'

She shook her head slightly. 'Because ——oh, because I didn't know how to, I suppose. I don't quite know how to now. There doesn't seem to be anything definite to explain.'

'But you must have had some reason for coming back.' She waited for a moment; then, 'Did you have a — a bust-up, Poppet?'

'No,' she said. 'We didn't have a bust-up.' She swerved aside a little, abruptly: 'As a matter of fact, I left three weeks or so before Christmas.'

'You did!'

She nodded. 'Went to New York, and traipsed around to theatrical agencies with all the other millions.' Her face relaxed for an instant into a faint show of amusement. 'It was pretty gruesome! My money gave out, of course; so I got a job in a restaurant, lived on air, and saved up enough to run home on. I'd probably' — she was serious again — 'have come sooner, only I was so scared that you'd all think I'd — you know — *repented!*'

Robin observed, with great earnestness: 'You are, really, the most complete idiot!' Then she returned to her question: 'But *why* did you leave? What about ——'

'Rand?'

'Yes. Don't you — don't you love him any more, Poppet?'

'No,' she said. 'I don't think so.' Her voice was quite even. 'I don't know whether I ever did love him. Much, I mean.'

Robin's eyes were puzzled. 'But why did you go away with him?'

Poppet didn't answer for a moment; she seemed to be gathering her words together, to be placing them deliberately; then: 'I've gone over and over the whole thing, especially this last week. I've tried to hold it off, as if it didn't belong to me, and look all round it. I felt I had to get it quite straight. And it seems to me' — she began to speak more quickly, more vigorously than she had been doing — 'it seems to me that I went — not altogether, of course, but partly — mostly, even — because of the *opposition.* It obscured the real issue — I mean the point as to whether I really loved him or not. Do you see what I mean? Not just your opposition, and the others', but that feeling of being up against a — a huge mass of traditions and prejudices and codes and — so on. It sort of *distorted* the situation. It made it not a question of living with Rand because I loved him, but because I felt I must prove to myself that I wasn't a coward — wasn't scared of the consequences of living with him! It was a sort of challenge — do you see? Defying convention, all that sort of thing, it seemed — you know — brave, and romantic, and important. Terribly *important!* It wasn't just an — escapade. I didn't do it lightly. I tried to; I tried to look at it the way he did, but I couldn't. I thought I was testing myself. I thought ——' She broke off with an abrupt gesture of impatience. 'I'm sounding so damned clumsy! Does it make sense? Do you see what I *mean?*'

Robin said: 'That you don't think you would have gone if there hadn't been any opposition to your going.'

'No.' She shook her head quickly. 'Not as much as that. I don't know —— But it does seem to me that if there hadn't been any opposition I would've been able to see the whole thing more clearly — from the proper angle. I wouldn't have dramatized it all the way I did. I wouldn't have felt — there wouldn't have been any opportunity for me to feel — that I was doing something *brave.*'

'But you'd probably have gone off then,' Robin suggested, 'casually, without thinking anything.'

'Perhaps,' she granted. 'Oh, I don't mean the opposition was the only reason. And I don't mean it was the *fault* of the opposition, either — it was my attitude towards it, the way I used it. And there were other things, of course. There was the feeling ——' She hesitated. 'You know it! I was so frightfully afraid of *missing something!* I felt if I didn't go there'd probably be a gap in my life, and it seemed, somehow, as if it would be better to have a — a solid mistake than a gap!' She paused again, her eyes narrowed a little, and thoughtful; then, 'I suppose we're all pretty much like that,' she observed. 'Look at the way we're always the first to arrive at anything, and the last to leave. We don't want to miss a turn! We're so — so desperately *interested* in everything!'

'But that's all right,' Robin said. 'We ought to be — oughtn't we?'

'Yes, I suppose so' — she spoke slowly. 'But I expect it has its dangerous side, too. I mean, we can sort of *squander* ourselves, indiscriminately. We think everything's interesting, but we ought to be able to tell what's *worth* our interest. We don't see things in the right perspective — clearly enough. Probably half the time things are interesting because we imagine so much into them, because we look at them so romantically.' She stopped for a moment. 'Have you ever realized,' she asked, 'what an awful little swarm of romantics we are!'

'We?'

'Yes — as a family. The whole crowd of us.' She ticked them off: 'Look at Boots: thinks he can reform the world. That's romantic, isn't it? And Ricky: always thinking he's found some one perfect. And Mimsy: so damned sure she can map her life out to suit her own taste. That's another form of it. And then you ——'

'Yes?' Robin said.

Poppet regarded her for a moment. 'Oh, you,' she declared — 'you're the worst of us all!'

After a while Robin turned back a little: 'But about — him, Poppet. You thought you loved him, didn't you?'

Poppet laced her fingers together, and stared at them. 'Perhaps I *did*,' she said. 'He isn't the sort of person I should ever have for a friend, so I suppose I must have ——' She halted, rather abruptly. For the first time her poise seemed to waver a trifle, to half-slip from her; then, in a carefully dispassionate voice, she remarked: 'You know, he can be awfully charming, Robin. There's something, it's like a child — simple — under all the — the rest. It's rather — appealing.' She continued to stare at her fingers; then she suddenly looked up. 'There's one thing I've found out,' she said. 'It's humiliating — *degrading* — not to be able to respect a person you love.'

There was a family conference the next day. What, now that she was with them once more, was Poppet going to do? 'Something hard!' she said. 'Something I can sink my teeth into!' Oh, the joy, the unutterable relief, of working again — really working, not stuffing things into boxes, not merely memorizing page after page of Shakespeare as she had done down there in the South. Long, grinding rehearsals; lines to be absorbed in a few hours; parts to be dug into — she felt an almost feverish eagerness for it all. 'Perhaps I'd better go back to New York,' she suggested; but they stamped the proposal out quickly: 'Oh, no, Poppet! Please! Stay here! We'll find you something!'

It was Jessamine Varney who called Robin's attention to the Kenmere Dramatic Club. 'It would be amateur work, of course, but they seem to have been doing some rather interesting things recently ——'

Robin, seizing upon the idea with avidity, made prompt investigations, and within half an hour or so was interviewing a young man with a blond beard who was one of the organizers of the Club.

He escorted her about the hall, and through the workrooms downstairs; he explained, with amiable candor: 'Several of us have a lot of money, and we want to do something with it. We hope the thing'll develop into a regular Little Theater, but we're in a decidedly embryonic state at present, as you can see ——'

Robin was fired with enthusiasm. She sat on one of the paws of a large wooden sphinx which was being constructed for a symbolical interlude in the next play they were producing; she leaned forward, her hands clasped, and said, 'Why, of course! Of course! It sounds great!' as, warming before her interest, he sketched out various plans for the future of the organization. In no time at all she was driving, hard and straight, in a definite direction: 'Look here! You've got the money, and your intentions are swell. But you're all pretty green, aren't you? You don't know the ropes of the business. Now it seems to me, Mr. Garthe, it seems to me that what you need is somebody with professional experience to come and take hold of things for you ——' She dangled Poppet before him; indeed, she established Poppet, firmly, then and there, at the head of the Club: 'You know Pauline Kipling — who used to be with Clumington?'

At the end of five minutes the young man was exclaiming: 'I say! that'd be splendid! D'you think she really would!'

'Rather!' Robin declared; then, somewhat more diplomatically: 'I mean, I think she might be interested in the proposition.' She leaned forward still farther, and spoke in a confidential tone: 'Listen! You write her a letter and tell her you've heard she isn't engaged at the moment, and you wonder if she'd consider coming here. Don't say anything about me talking to you. We mustn't let her think we've been — been hatching it up beforehand. It'd throw her off, probably. You pretend you thought of it yourself. See?'

The young man nodded, gracious if puzzled.

At the end of another five minutes he was exclaiming: 'But I say! What about you? Couldn't you come, too?'

'Gosh!' Robin said. 'I wish I *could!*'

Poppet looked up. 'Any of you ever heard of the Kenmere Dramatic Club?'

'The what?'

She repeated the name.

Robin shook her head, and helped herself to more marmalade. Then she paused. 'Oh — *Kenmere!* Why, yes. That's the one somebody — who was it? — was talking about the other day. It's supposed to be doing rather interesting things, isn't it? Marmalade, Ricky?'

In two weeks' time Poppet was rushing about with the air of a general conducting a momentous campaign. She directed rehearsals, she read plays, she wore overalls and helped construct scenery; she wrote advertisements, and designed a program cover; she sorted out the heterogeneous members of the organization into Possibles and Impossibles, and when the Impossibles kicked at being relegated to the level of ushers and ticket-sellers, she resigned her services and stalked home, only to be recalled the next day by a depleted but determined company. She changed the name from the Kenmere Dramatic Club to the Kenmere Playhouse; and she took it into her heart, and planned great things for it with an almost savage intensity.

She would lean across the table, saying: 'You see, later on ——'

And, 'Of course!' the Kiplings would chorus. 'Of course!' — engrossed and enthusiastic.

12

Robin strode up and down, her hands in her pockets, and her eyes sweeping over the hall. 'You know, it isn't a bad house at all. In fact, it's rather nice!'

'Thank you,' Mrs. McMasters acknowledged laconically.

'But it's so — so ordinary-looking!'

'I'll get a couple of giraffes for the parlor.'

Robin's thoughts were racing ahead to a conclusion. 'You know, Mrs. Mac, you could *do* things with it! You really could! If it was all repapered, and painted ——' She continued to stride about, alert, interested. 'Take the dining-room' — she paused in the doorway. 'You could pull up that awful oilcloth, and lacquer the furniture — yellow, for instance; yellow's a nice color — and have yellow curtains

— and blue dishes ——' She became more and more charmed with the idea. 'Say! why *don't* you!'

Mrs. McMasters shrugged her shoulders. 'Can't you see me prancing round with a paint-pot?'

'But look here!' Robin persisted. 'If people aren't coming, it means they don't like it. You'll have to do something.' She ticked the assets off briskly: 'The location's good, and the food's good, and the rates are all right. But there's nothing interesting about it! It all needs — jerking up!' She swung round. 'Look at that hat-rack!' — she pointed an accusatory finger at it. 'Why, it's — it's *awful!* It's like an octopus! And the carpet! And that stuff on the table! And the way ——'

'All right,' Mrs. McMasters soothed. 'You come in and jerk it up for me.'

Robin stopped short. 'If I could,' she declared — 'if I could, in a couple of months this place'd be so different you'd never know it!'

'I don't doubt you,' Mrs. McMasters said.

It wasn't officially spring, but there was a feeling, a smell, of it in the air. The dirty heaps of old snow in the streets were flattening themselves out, pouring themselves away noisily down the gutters; the sparrows were making a great row; the balloon-man had sprung up again at the park gate, and the popcorn-woman, shut in her little glass cart and wearing a new hat trimmed with pink cotton roses...

Robin swung along the pavement, bareheaded, with her coat flying open. She went into the flower-shop at the corner and bought a large pot of tulips for the janitor's wife who had just had twins, much to the janitor's consternation; then she came out again and bought a bag of popcorn, and three balloons for three little girls who were standing in a row gazing up at the bobbing mass with manifest admiration. 'What color?' Robin inquired; and 'Red,' they breathed. Then she turned into the park.

Great sweeps of sunshine; the smell of moist earth drying, warming; bare trees black against the sky, but looking as if they might, at any moment, burst radiantly into leaves. People sitting on the green benches again; children playing marbles in little groups, and running, and sailing boats on the blue pond; the starched white skirts of parading nursemaids positively glittering; even a barrel-organ somewhere, cranking out harsh, indomitable music...

She meandered along, munching the popcorn with relish. After a while she left the path, and went down towards the pond to inspect the lilac-bushes. She touched them carefully with her finger-tips, to feel if there was any sign of buds. No, not yet. But soon! You could almost *hear* them coming! A small, pushing, growing sound! Everywhere: on every side of her! The shrubs seemed to quiver — the trees — the whole earth. She stood motionless for a moment, feeling all warm and bright and expectant.

A very little boy was sailing a boat from a long piece of string. He trod up and down, grave, absorbed. Then the string slipped suddenly from his fingers, and the boat began to move out to sea. He stared at it, stricken; he began to weep.

Robin put the tulips on the ground, and foraged around for a few stones. 'Look!' she said. 'Watch it come back!' She threw the stones out, making a series of small waves. The boat drifted in a bit. She got down on her knees, leaned forward, and grasped the end of the string. 'There!'

The little boy gazed at her reverently.

She sat back on her heels. 'A nice boat,' she observed.

He transferred his gaze to the boat. 'Nice boat,' he corroborated.

She took a piece of popcorn out of the bag and put it on the boat.

'That's a lady,' she explained. 'She wants to go for a ride.'

He sat down, too, and let the boat slide out, very carefully so as not to upset the lady.

A little girl, wheeling a large doll's carriage, descended upon them. She came at a great rate, looking very poised and efficient. She left the carriage a few feet away, approached the little boy, and gave him a loud smack.

'Hey!' Robin objected. 'What's the matter?'

'He's sitting down,' the little girl pointed out. 'And he isn't supposed to sit down.' She hoisted the little boy to his feet; she felt his behind. 'You're all wet!' she pronounced accusingly.

'Never mind,' Robin said. 'He'll dry.'

The little girl stopped short and gazed at her, standing quite still, her hands clasped behind her back. Then she suddenly rushed over to the carriage, wheeled it forward, deserted it again, and stared rigidly at the ground to show that she wasn't interested.

Robin took the hint. 'Gosh! what a nice doll!'

The little girl whirled round, radiant, excited. She flung herself upon the carriage and grabbed the doll. 'Look! It can close its eyes!' She tipped it back and forth violently; then she grasped it by its neck, turned it upside-down, and thrust it out at arm's length. 'Look! It has *pants!*'

Sure enough — pants with lace on them!

She dropped the doll, and swung her attention to the carriage. 'Look! A *cover!*' She whipped the cover off and flourished it. 'And a *pillow!*'

The little boy came and stood beside her. 'A pillow!' he echoed in a pleased voice. He smiled at Robin. *Our* pillow, he wished it understood.

Having exhibited all the contents of the carriage, the little girl began to show off the little boy. 'He has new shoes!'

The little boy gazed at his shoes with great interest, as if he had never seen them before.

'And look at his buttons! They're *gold!*'

The little boy gazed at his buttons.

Then the little girl dug into her pocket and brought forth something which was evidently of peculiar, inestimable importance. It was wrapped up in a handkerchief; in two handkerchiefs, in fact. She unfolded them slowly — carefully — while the little boy hung over them with an air of breathless absorption. 'Look!' she said, in a hushed voice. 'A *tooth!*'

Robin was properly impressed. 'My goodness! so it *is!*'

The little girl tried to remain calm, but couldn't quite manage it. 'It's *my* tooth!' she proclaimed.

The little boy nodded. '*Her* tooth!' he assured Robin.

The little girl was very generous. 'You can touch it,' she said; and, after it had been touched, 'You can pick it up, if you want!' She became more and more expansive: 'Would you like to see the *hole?*'

'I'd love to!' Robin declared.

So she stooped forward, with her hands on her knees, and opened her mouth wide.

Robin peered in.

'Can you see it?' the little boy inquired anxiously.

'Sure! A big one!'

'Let me see, too!' he begged.

The little girl stooped lower, and he put his face up flat against hers and stared in earnestly. 'Where?'

'On that side,' Robin directed. 'At the top.'

The little girl graciously kept her mouth open until he had found it.

While the tooth was being wrapped up again, the little boy had a sudden idea. 'Would you like to see *my* hole?' he asked.

The little girl turned on him. 'You haven't got a hole!' she said coldly.

The little boy drooped...

Robin picked the tulips up again, and started across the grass towards the path. The little boy ran after her. He handed back a piece of popcorn.

'The lady,' he said.

She went to the rear of the building and left the tulips at the door of the janitor's basement apartment; then, since it was quicker than going around to the front again, ran up the back stairway. In the kitchen she took her coat off and threw it across a chair. There was a bag of oranges by the sink, and she got one, cut a hole in the top of it, stuck a lump of sugar in the hole, and, balancing herself on the table, sucked the juice up thirstily. When she had finished with it, she tossed the orange into the colander; then picked her coat up again, slung it over her shoulder, and went out into the hall.

The apartment seemed deserted at first; then she heard some one speak. Mimsy. In the living-room, probably. She strolled across the hall, humming a little...

Mimsy was at the farther end of the room. She was standing on a chair, hanging up the etching which Ricky had brought home the other day. The window behind her was wide open, and her hair was blowing slightly, and the soft green stuff of her dress. She half-turned, one arm still lifted. 'Is that straight, Denis?' 'The left side's a bit high — just touch it.' He was holding the back of the chair, looking up. She leaned forward a little, and the sunlight seemed to follow her movement, to droop brightly about her. 'There! That's all right.' She straightened herself again; she gathered her blowing skirt close to her and stepped down quickly — too quickly, so that she half-stumbled. Denis caught her, steadied her. She laughed, and said: 'Oh — I'm sorry' — then stopped short. Denis lowered his face until it was pressed against her hair, lowered his face to hers, and his mouth to her mouth. Mimsy's arms curved up about him. They stood silent, motionless.

Robin closed the kitchen door after her. She sat on the tall stool, her hands folded in her lap. She felt extraordinarily still; she felt as if everything inside of her had stopped — had been dashed into a terrible calm. She thought once: 'I wonder what they are doing now?' — but the thought had no substance; it simply glanced across her consciousness like a flying shadow. She sat there for some time. Then there was a sound in the hall, footsteps, and she got up. She left the kitchen and made her way down the back stairs into the basement. It was dark there, and very quiet. She went past the barrels of ashes, and the coal bins, to the long row of locker-rooms. The Kiplings' was at the end. She opened the door, went in, and closed the door again after her.

She seated herself stiffly on the edge of a wooden crate. It was pitch-black all about her. There was a scuttling noise. Rats —— She began to think, clearly, deliberately, even interestedly, about rats. Were there rats down here? If there were, what did they live on? What did they eat? Did they eat wood? How big were rats? What did rats *do?* The scuttling noise ceased. The darkness held her, possessed her. She felt as if she were a part of it; she felt as if, were a light to be switched on suddenly, she would die, just as the darkness would die. She thought: 'Mimsy and Denis ——' Still that utter quietness within her, that terrible calm. She lost all sense of time; she might have been rooted there, frozen under some strange, grim spell...

After a while she made a great effort and got up. She pushed the door open, and groped her way past the other locker-rooms, stumbling now and then, and steeling herself to meet the harsh blow of daylight. But it had gone. There was a small wind, and stars in the sky. She walked around the building to the front entrance, and took the elevator up to the top floor. A lamp was burning in the living-room; but there was no one there. She thought, with the same clear deliberation with which she had thought about the rats: 'Poppet won't be home until late, and Ricky and Boots are having dinner with Henry.' It was extraordinary, the ease with which she could focus her attention upon things like this. The rug she was stepping on, for instance. It needed cleaning. The colors were all blurred. Mimsy's door was closed; and she passed it and went into her own room. She hung her coat up, carefully, and noticed that one of the buttons was loose; she took her shoes off, and put on the beaded moccasins which Boots had given her for Christmas. She stood motionless then. There seemed to be nothing else to do; nothing anywhere. She sat down, her hands folded in her lap...

After a while Mimsy's door was opened. She heard her going into the living-room, crossing the living-room. There was a silence; than a slight metallic sound. Mimsy's voice said: 'Hasketh 7704.'

Her hands suddenly gripped one another. She sat up, taut, stiff-lipped. Hasketh 7704! Who was that?

Mimsy's voice again: 'Mr. Widderness, please.'

Widderness! Charles! A great hotness rushing through her!

'Oh — isn't he?' A pause; then, 'Will you ask him to call Miss Kipling when he comes in? Thank you.' Footsteps again, and the reclosing of a door.

She remained motionless for a moment. Then, all at once, she hugged her arms across her breast and bent forward, filled with a sort of feverish ecstasy. Yes — yes! Of *course!* Charles Widderness! She began to rock back and forth, her hands, her face, her whole body, burning and quivering. Mimsy would marry Charles Widderness! Oh, of course — of course! Why hadn't she known that! Mimsy wouldn't take Denis! She knew she couldn't take him. She had no right to him; he was hers — *hers!* He had been hers from the beginning; he had been hers before Mimsy had ever set eyes upon him, had ever known that he existed. She found herself, for a moment or two, shaken by an anger so bitter and savage that it was almost hatred. How *dare* Mimsy — Mimsy with her pale loveliness, with her beautiful quiet ways —— She thought she could take Denis, did she! Smiling at Denis, curving her arms —— Oh, no, no! She thrust the anger out of herself. She mustn't think such things! Mimsy wasn't like that! Mimsy knew she couldn't have him; she was going to marry Charles Widderness because she knew it. When he called up, she was going to say: 'I will marry you, Charles——' Yes! That was the way: that was the *right* way! She ought to marry him! She ought to have married him a long time ago. He would give her all the things she wanted, and needed; he would make her happy with his things. Of course! *Of course!* Mimsy would be happy! She would have a fine house, and move with fine people: that was what Mimsy had wanted, always and always, and now she would have what she wanted because she was going to marry Charles Widderness. Denis couldn't give her those things. Denis couldn't make her happy. Denis — Denis ——

She gradually stopped rocking herself. She let her arms fall and sat quite still, quite still. She thought, with a sort of dull wonder: 'But Denis loves Mimsy ——'

She got up and went out into the hall, and crossed it, and stood in front of Mimsy's closed door. There was no sound. She slid down on her knees, and looked through the keyhole. It was dark inside. Mimsy was in there, in the dark. She slid down farther, until she was crouching on the floor. A faint sobbing sound came to her ears. She lifted her hands quickly and pressed them against her mouth. Had she made that, or had Mimsy? She felt suddenly bewildered — terrified. She pressed herself closer to the floor, her hands still flattened against her mouth. What must she do? What — *what* —— Something within her cried out: 'Oh, show me what to do! Show me!'

She crouched there in silence; and after a while it became plain.

She got up; she went into the living-room and sat down with the telephone in her lap. She felt quite calm again: full of that strange, icy calmness. She kept her eyes riveted on the telephone, and her thoughts riveted on the thing that she must do...

There was a ring at last. She took the receiver off the hook, and heard, at the same moment, the opening of a door. She held the mouthpiece against her shoulder, and called out: 'All right, Mimsy — it's for me.' Then she lowered her head. 'Hello?'

Charles Widderness's clipped greeting.

She said: 'Oh, yes,' quickly, evenly. 'I won't keep you a minute. I just want to know how you liked the play the other night. The...Yes, that one. Was it good?'

His words pelting into her ear. What was he saying? Listen! She must listen! '...interesting...extremely well ——'

'Really? Then you think we'd like it?' She must go on for a few moments; she mustn't sound rushed, mustn't sound queer. 'Ricky wasn't sure, so I thought I'd...Yes...Yes, it is safer, isn't it? Well, thanks for... No, next week, I expect. We're rather...Oh, really? After the fifteenth? Then we'd better hurry up, hadn't we? Well...Yes...Yes, I will. Well, thanks awfully for calling ——'

She put the receiver down again. She got up; she went across the room, and across the hall, walking heavily to announce her approach.

The door was open now, and a lamp had been turned on inside. Mimsy was standing by the bed. Her green dress, that had blown so lightly in the wind, was crumpled and twisted, as if she had been lying down; there was a sharp color in her cheeks, and her hair had come half-undone and was falling about her shoulders. Robin felt startled for a moment. She almost cried out: 'Oh, *Mimsy* ——' Almost ran to her. There was something frightening in seeing Mimsy disheveled like this: Mimsy who was always so poised, so exquisite.

She said: 'Hello' — brightly, a little too brightly she realized as the word swung back on her. She mustn't exaggerate. She must be careful. She went over to the window, and stared down. Her hands were cold, but quite steady; she had a curious feeling of aloofness and competence, as if she were moving through a scene in a play. Only one fact was before her: something had to be done, and done well, and the quicker the better. No — not too quickly! She must remember that. She couldn't dash through it; she couldn't say: 'I saw you and Denis, Mimsy. I know you love one another; so you must marry him, and I'll clear off, or something.' She couldn't do it like that. She must move gently, skillfully. If she blundered — oh, she knew what a blunder would mean! Mimsy would swear that she didn't love Denis; would rush off frantically to Charles Widderness to prove that she didn't. Mimsy was like that. She must be careful — careful.

She turned round again. Mimsy had gone over to the dressing-table, and was fiddling with things: a powder-puff, the stopper of a perfume jar. Robin thought: 'How she must hate my coming in here!' She could almost feel Mimsy flinching from her, imploring her to go away. But she was being careful, too. Probably at this very moment she was saying: 'I must be careful.' She took up a piece of chamois and a small pot, and went and sat down on the bed. She began polishing her nails, with a sort of nervous violence. Her hair was still tumbled, and that sharp color still burning high in her cheeks: it gave her a strange look, a distraught look — Mimsy who had always been so cool, so sure of herself. Robin thought: 'I should have brought something to do ——' She crossed the room and picked the nail-file off the dressing-table; then balanced herself against the arm of a chair. They were both silent: leaning forward — working busily. Now, then! She must start! Come on! The sooner she started, the sooner it would be over! But Mimsy spoke first:

'Did you — did you have a heavy day?'

'Oh, rather!' No, no! Again too brightly! She mustn't let her voice fly out like that. She said: 'It's funny to think I've only another couple of months at the Tavern, isn't it?' That was better. Just as if nothing had happened — nothing. Now for a real start: 'You know, I've been wondering lately what on earth I'll do without it. I mean, without some sort of work.' Mimsy wasn't listening; she could feel that she wasn't. But never mind! Go on; don't stop! She would listen soon enough! 'If only Denis wasn't so — so old fashioned ——' How must she sound now? Not light — no. As if she were saying something that she had been mulling over within herself for some time. Thoughtful, confidential: yes — that was it. She was telling Mimsy something that had been worrying her; she was confiding in Mimsy: 'You know, it seems to me there are some people who've *got* to have work. They're sort of lost without it. Like me. I've always been rushing around doing things. Haven't I? From the very first? And I love it! I don't think I ——' No, not yet! Not too fast! 'I mean, can you imagine me just looking after an apartment, and getting meals, and — and mending socks! I can't!'

Mimsy's voice came through a silence: 'But that won't be all you'll do, Robin. Of course not ——'

Stamp it out! Quickly! Go on! 'Well, I'm not so sure. I'm beginning to realize it'll probably be the main part, anyhow. Denis is so ——' Denis! *Denis!* — 'I mean, he seems to think that just being his wife is enough for anybody. He doesn't seem to understand that I want to do things, too. I — I can't help wondering, sometimes ——'

Mimsy said, almost harshly: 'I should think if you loved a person, he'd be more important than other things!'

Than other things — than Charles Widderness's things! 'Yes — with some kinds of people, I suppose. But I don't know if I'm that kind.' There! That was good! It was becoming better as she went along. If you loved a person —— 'Perhaps, if you loved a person *well enough* ——'

Mimsy had stopped rubbing her nails; she was looking at her. 'What do you mean, Robin?'

Oh, she was acting, too! She was forcing her voice to obey her, was making her face smooth and calm like the face of an image. Only her eyes —— She had never seen Mimsy's eyes look like that before! She wanted to say: 'Oh, don't, Mimsy! It's all right! In a moment it will be all right!' She said: 'Well, I suppose I really oughtn't to talk about it, only ——' How should she sound now? Troubled — yes. Halting, because she had never put it into words before. 'Only sometimes I — I wonder if — you know, if I haven't made a mistake about Denis.' There! How easily it had come out — how *easily!* She thought: 'Why, it's like playing a game! It isn't bad at all!'

She stood up again, and threw the nail-file onto the dressing-table. In the mirror she saw Mimsy. She was sitting quite motionless, staring at her. Mimsy's eyes —— She stopped short, suddenly stricken; she felt a sort of hot terror creeping through her. Mimsy's eyes! Oh, what was it! She had guessed — she had guessed ——

'Robin!'

She cried out within herself, cried out loudly, like a trumpet, in the midst of her terror: 'No! No!' She must not guess! *She must not!* This whole scene had been timed too soon; she had been hurried — clumsy — incoherent, perhaps — but in spite of everything Mimsy should not guess! She felt that icy calmness closing over her again. A thing to be done, to be done well and done now — that was it; that was all. She must turn to Mimsy; she must let Mimsy search her face, search her eyes — and find nothing there, nothing except what she chose purposely to display.

She swung round, her hands gripped behind her. She said: 'Oh, I suppose you're surprised! But I can't help it, Mimsy. Of course I'm fond of Denis ——' Fond of Denis! Fond —— Oh, shut up! Go on — *go on!* 'But the fact is, I simply can't feature myself doing nothing but — well, being his wife. I want to do interesting things — all sorts of things. I'd never be able to settle down into domesticity. I'm not like that.' She spoke with slow deliberation, her hands still gripped behind her: 'I guess it's pretty much as you said. We can't have everything, so we've got to choose what we will have. I'm afraid I — made a mistake in thinking I wanted Denis more than ——' Than what? *What?*

Mimsy, still with that strange harshness in her voice, said: 'But you can have him and your work, Robin! Of course! Thousands of people do! Don't be ridiculous, Robin!' She sounded angry; the color flamed in her face.

Robin shook her head. 'No — no, don't you see? It'd take all the fun out of things — knowing he disapproved. I'd always feel apologetic. I'd always be held back.'

'But if you love him!' Mimsy cried. 'If you love him —' She stopped short.

Robin turned, and picked up the nail-file again. She said, forcing the words between her lips: 'I suppose that's just it. I'm fond of him, but I don't really — love him.' And then, for a moment, she hated Mimsy. Why hadn't she helped her! Why hadn't she accepted what was being offered! Why had Mimsy driven her to saying *that!*

She stood in the hall. Well, that was done. And now Denis. Or should she wait a while? Yes, she had better wait. To-morrow — what was to-morrow? Thursday, Saturday. Saturday: that was good. He'd have the afternoon off; she could see him then. Perhaps she ought to call him up. 'Hello, Denis, can I see you to-morrow afternoon?' No; she had better wait. Mimsy might hear her, might wonder ——

She became conscious of a banging sound. Some one was at the back door: the janitor. He bobbed his head to her, and said: 'Good-evening, Miss Kipling. My wife wanted me to thank you for the flowers.'

'The flowers ——?'

'Yes — the tulips.'

There was a pause. He looked puzzled; then uncomfortable.

'My little girl said you left a pot of tulips ——'

'Oh — yes.' The tulips. She strained back, a thousand years, and remembered a pot of tulips...

It was quite early, they were still at breakfast, when Denis telephoned.

He said: 'Hello, Robin. Can I see you this afternoon? There's something I must talk over with you.'

She spoke evenly, just as she had spoken to Charles Widderness: 'Why, of course. D'you want to come here, or shall we ——'

He suggested driving somewhere, into the country — 'If the car's free.'

Yes, it would be. Henry was taking every one over to the Playhouse for a dress rehearsal. No — she didn't have to go. No — it was quite all right. Two o'clock, then. Very well. Bye-bye.

She sat down again at the table. The click of silver against dishes; Mimsy pouring out more coffee for Ricky; Poppet in one of her effervescent moods:

'— And when she'd finished I said, "Madam, the reason you thought it a ridiculous play was because it was a trifle over your admirably marcelled head. I think you'll find what you want at The Palace, straight down Hammond Street, three blocks to the left, children half price ——"

'More coffee, Robin?'

'No — no, thank you.' At two o'clock. She must leave the Tavern early; she must get some gas ——

'"— And in closing, my dear Madam, I would ask you to remember the words of Ming Tie Hoy, the noted Oriental philosopher of the Fung Dynasty: It is the custom of little minds to feel superior to what they cannot understand. Adios, dear Madam,"' — she flourished her cup. '"If you'll call at the box-office your money'll be refunded in full, and your car-fare, and your ——"'

Boots, with a book propped against the cream jug in front of him, requested: 'Hey! shut up!'

'Who's he speaking to?' Poppet inquired brightly. 'Little sister?'

They might go to — what was the name of that place? Jackson's Farm. They had never been there together. They mustn't go anywhere where they had been together. Like the woods beyond —— Shut up! *Shut up!* 'Marmalade, please.' She already had marmalade on her plate. 'Oh — sorry. I didn't notice.' There had been a stone wall. They had spun stones into the stream, making them jump. She could see him swinging his arm back — the sun making his skin golden, his eyes narrowed against the sun ——

Boots munching toast, and poring over his book. 'Say! d'you know that if every country in the world was to ——'

Oh, Denis — *Denis* —— Go on! Eat something! *Eat* ——

Poppet asking: 'Who's coming to the rehearsal this afternoon? All of you?'

'Yes — aren't we?'

The rehearsal? Now then — quickly — casually, just as if it meant nothing: 'I'm going over to Jackson's Farm with Denis.' Mimsy lifting her head at that, turning to her. 'He says he feels like a drive.' Was that all right? Was it enough? Ought she to say more? Perhaps she had sounded abrupt — queer. Perhaps they were all staring at her! Were they? Look up! Look up! Go on! Don't be an idiot! No — nobody was staring at her. It was all right. Everything was all right.

Mimsy reaching for the coffee-pot. 'More coffee, Robin?'

She had asked that before. 'No, thanks.' Or should she say yes. Perhaps she ought —— Oh, it didn't matter! Of course it didn't matter.

They were all scattering about the apartment now.

She crossed the living-room and picked the morning paper off the desk. She held it in front of her. She thought: 'He is going to tell me.' Yes. How funny that she shouldn't have realized that he *would* tell her. She had been supposing the whole time that she would have to do it all, by herself. But he was going to tell her. Of course. It was the natural thing. She wondered *how* he would tell her. Perhaps he would just say that he felt they had been mistaken. 'I am very fond of you, Robin, but I think ——' She would make it easy for him. Oh, she would make it easy! 'I understand, Denis. In fact, I've been thinking the same thing myself ——' Or perhaps he would come right out with the complete truth. 'Mimsy and I love one another.' Would he tell her that? No — no! But he *might*. She must be ready for it. She mustn't be taken unawares...

Ricky banging on the bathroom door: 'I say, Poppet! Hurry up in there ——'

Mimsy clearing away the breakfast things.

Boots stamping in with his trench-coat over his arm. 'Hey, Robin! Look at these buttons! You said you'd sew them on for me!'

Buttons ——

Poppet's voice asking if any one had seen her comb: 'One large, elderly, maiden comb with half her teeth missing ——'

Boots glowering and fuming: 'Why the hell don't you do what you say you'll do! You're always forgetting something! Look at them! How can I ——'

'All right, Boots — all right.' Oh, don't shout! Don't be cross with me!

It was sunless out, and very still. The sky was a clear pale gray, with no cloud-shapes, no variations of tone. The trees were carved darkly against it; birds flew up now and then, black upon silver. The road was straight in front of them, between calm fields and occasional white buildings...

Denis said: 'That looks as if it might be it, doesn't it? Is there a sign?'

She leaned out a little. 'Yes — Jackson's Farm. Enter — wait a minute — Enter at Other Driveway. You'll have to back up a bit.'

He drove into the enclosure, and parked the car beside several others. She got out first; she stood motionless for a moment. How still it was! No sound, no slightest movement. Then Denis slammed the door and slipped his arm through hers; and they walked in silence across the grass.

Inside, in the large dim tearoom, there were some half a dozen people scattered about, smoking, talking in low voices.

Robin glanced round quickly. 'Over there, shall we? In the corner?' There were no windows near the corner: it would be better not to sit in the frank white light of a window. She took her hat off; and unbuttoned her leather jacket and dropped it over the back of her chair.

A girl in a yellow smock came across the room and lit a candle for them.

'Tea?'

'Yes, please.'

'Lemon or cream?'

'Cream for me. Lemon, Denis?'

'Please.'

'Toast, sandwiches, or muffins?'

'Muffins.' Muffins had to be broken open and buttered: muffins gave one something to do.

Denis was leaning forward, holding a cigarette to the candle-flame. His eyelids were lowered; his lashes were casting dark, spiky shadows on his cheeks. She stared at him for a moment, absorbed, forgetful. His face was so near — if she were to bend a little —— Denis! She felt a sudden twist of pain, and terror. Oh, why had they come in here! They shouldn't have; they should have stayed outside. It would have been so much easier outside. There had been wide fields there all about them, and a tall sky; but here they were alone in a corner, sitting opposite one another. It would even have been easier by a window — why hadn't she thought of that! They could have looked out of a window ——

Denis was studying a card on the table. 'They have special Sunday dinners here.'

'Have they?' What did it matter! They would never come here again — never!

The tea was brought over. The cream was in a small jug shaped like a duck. 'How pretty!' she said. She lifted it up; it trembled a little in her hand, she put it down again quickly. She poured the tea into the flowered cups; and Denis took the cover off the muffins. They were both silent for a few minutes.

'Like some jam or something, Robin?'

'No, thanks.'

Silence again.

She forced herself to chew, to swallow. She felt herself, now that the time had arrived, shaken with a sort of feverish eagerness to hear him say what he had to say. Oh, be quick! Tell me — tell me! I am ready, Denis, I am ready! But he didn't speak. He must be fumbling for an opening, searching for the right words. She felt a sudden wave of compassion: she wanted to help him — couldn't she make the first move for him?

'You said there was something you had to talk over, Denis ——'

'Yes.' His voice seemed to snap across hers. He pushed his plate aside, and picked the cigarette up again. 'Yes, there is.'

She buttered another piece of muffin. Her hands were unsteady, her heart was hurting her with its beating. She thought: 'But he is only going to tell me what I know already.' There was nothing to be afraid of!

He said: 'I saw Meredith last night. He wants me — I'm to leave for New York at the end of next week.'

There was a pause.

She lifted her head slowly.

He was leaning forward, but without looking at her, tapping the cigarette against his saucer. 'It'll be something of a rush, but we'll be able to manage it, won't we? I thought we could get married on Friday, say — or of course I can go ahead, and you come on a bit later ——'

She was staring at him; her hands had fallen into her lap, were clasped together tightly, tightly. 'Get married, Denis ——'

He met her eyes. The candle between them threw a clear, revealing light into their faces.

'What's the matter, Robin?'

She didn't answer for a moment; then she put one of her hands against her mouth, and slid it across her cheek — a slow, wavering movement. 'Oh — nothing,' she said. 'It's just — just rather — sudden.' She bent down and seized the piece of muffin again, and began rebuttering it. All through her something was shouting — singing: 'He will marry me! He will still marry me!' She felt great waves of joy rushing over her; then they were gone, and she was quiet once more. Denis had asked Meredith to send him to New York. Of course. He was running away from Mimsy, just as she had intended to run away from him by marrying Charles Widderness. They had been willing to do this for her; because they loved her they had been willing to do this.

'We can put up at a hotel, until we find a place of our own. Or if you'd rather ——'

If only she could thank them! If only she could say: 'Oh, thank you — thank you! I will always remember. I will always hold in my heart this thing you would have done for me.'

There was a silence.

He was waiting for her to speak. She must speak! There was something to be done, and she must, after all, do it by herself. She said, and, even as she spoke, marvelled a little at the smooth quality of her voice: 'But I can't possibly go away now, Denis. I shan't be through with the Tavern for another couple of months or so; and there are the others — I've got to get them settled in a new apartment ——'

'Then I'd better go ahead, hadn't I? And when everything's fixed up at this end ——'

How kind he sounded! As if he were speaking to a child; as if he were saying: 'It's all right, Robin. I won't hurt you, Robin.' Oh, why with their love and kindness were they making it so hard for her!

She pushed her plate aside, as Denis had done, and propped her elbows on the table and cupped her chin in her hands. She said: 'You know, Denis, I — I wonder sometimes ——' No, not like that. It was from the wrong angle. A question would be better: questions sounded more *gradual*. 'Do you ever wonder, Denis, if we've — you know — if we haven't made a mistake?' She kept her eyes down; she knew that he was looking at her.

'What do you mean, Robin?'

That was what Mimsy had said, wasn't it? What do you mean —— Her voice was low, and a little hurried now: 'I haven't talked about it before because I haven't wanted to — to distress you. But I guess I ought to. I mean — there's no use our getting married unless we're quite sure' — she hesitated, fumbled a bit. 'I mean we — we're so different, Denis, aren't we? You want somebody who'll just be your wife, and I want to do all sorts of things. I've always wanted to. I don't think I'll be happy unless I can do them.'

'Well, in that case,' he said — 'in that case, we'd better look around for something, hadn't we, as soon as we get there?'

She thought sharply. 'He doesn't mind now! It doesn't matter to him now!' She felt, all at once, utterly crushed by the knowledge. Her careful words fell from her; she was conscious of nothing except that she must get this scene over with, must do what she had to do this moment, however crudely, however unconvincingly. She said: 'What I mean, Denis — don't you see? I think we've made a mistake! I don't think we ought to get married! I'm sorry — I'm awfully fond of you, you know that — but we've — I've made a mistake! I don't think we'd be happy together! We're so different — I'm terribly sorry — but I don't think ——' Oh, shut up! That was enough! Don't *babble!*

His voice struck her: 'Robin!'

She knew what that meant. She knew! He was commanding her to look at him, challenging her. She felt herself quivering under his voice — fainting — dying. Then something stiffened within her, stiffened all through her. Challenging her — was he! Very well! Let him — let him!

She threw her head back with a jerk.

His face, in the candlelight, was taut; his eyes — it was the first time she had ever seen his eyes look like that. He was about to speak, but she broke in before him. She held her hands out; she said: 'Oh, Denis! I'm sorry! I've hurt you! Oh, I'm so sorry! But it was better to tell you, wasn't it? It was better to be honest ——'

The apartment was empty.

She went into her own room and took her things off; then she stood motionless. What was there to do now? She couldn't seem to think. Was there anything else? Denis's photograph, on the bureau, caught her attention. She picked it up, and held it for a while — held it without looking at it, tightly, as if she were holding his hand. Then, still without looking at it, she slipped it out of the frame and tore it, with great care, into little pieces. She remembered other things then: some notes, a scarf, a book in which he had written. She carried them all across the hall, and across the living-room to the hearth. She knelt down, and built a small fire with newspaper and a few sticks of wood. When it was blazing, she dropped the notes in, one by one. Now and again a folded sheet curled back, and she read the words on it — read them hungrily, frantically, although she tried not to. Then the book. She ripped the pages out and thrust them after the notes. They flared up beautifully, up and up, making tall towers of flame. Then the cover; and the scarf, whirling and leaping like a strange fiery dancer; and, at the end, the photograph — piece by piece — little pieces of Denis — Denis's chin — part of Denis's hair — Denis's mouth, curving, almost laughing. She was burning Denis: burning him out of her heart, burning him out of her life. He was mounting up in scarlet and gold; he was going out in a great brightness...

She crouched there on the hearth. She folded her arms over her head, and rocked back and forth, crying, sobbing. 'Oh, Denis — *Denis* ——' She rocked back and forth, back and forth.

The flames drooped slowly; the brightness fell away.

After a while there were footsteps, snapping against the stone floor of the outer hall. They were growing louder, coming nearer. And now voices: Boots's voice — Ricky's. She scrambled up, confused and panic-stricken. They were coming back! In a moment the door would open, the light flash on! They would find her standing here, like this! Mimsy would find her! Mimsy would see ——

She flew through the darkness, across the living-room, across the hall, and into her own room. Oh, where could she hide herself from Mimsy! Where — *where!*

The front door opening; talking, and moving-about sounds. Somebody calling out: 'Robin ——'

She dropped on to the floor; she crawled under the bed and lay there, trembling, huddled up, her hands pressed against her mouth.

Windows being shut. It must be raining. Yes — the noisy splash of rain. Now a light being switched on, and the hall springing out sharply, like a picture thrown across a black screen. Feet passing the doorway: brown — those were Ricky's; Boots's with mud on them; now Mimsy's — green suède, with pale-colored stockings lifting into a green skirt that swung as she walked. Ricky saying: 'She's having dinner with Denis, I suppose.' Yes — yes! That was it! She was having dinner with Denis! The tap running in the bathroom; Mimsy repassing, with a smock over her green dress; the light being switched off again; and after a few minutes the sound of dishes being set out, the faint smell of cooking food...

She lay there under the bed, quite still — quite still.

Now they were back once more, moving about, and calling to one another. 'We can leave her ticket on the mantel ——' Ticket? Yes — of course! The symphony concert! They were going to the symphony concert! Oh, thank God! they were going away, they were going to leave her alone! Then Mimsy's voice: 'You two start ahead, and I'll wait for her.' Wait for her! Oh, but she mustn't do that! No — no! She *mustn't!* She almost cried out: 'Ricky, Boots — don't let her do that! Make her go with you! Please make her go with you!' But even while the cry was in her thought she realized that Mimsy wouldn't go. She would sit here, waiting, waiting. She would sit with the strange bright color in her cheeks, waiting to find out what had happened...

The apartment was quiet again. The hall was dark, except for a sliver of light sliding out of Mimsy's room and lying hard and vivid on the blackness. She stirred a little; then raised herself on her elbows. Slowly, carefully, she crawled from under the bed. She must get away — that was all she was conscious of now. She must get away! She fumbled about for her jacket, and put it on; she went towards the door. She must, somehow, get to the kitchen and down the back stairs. Yes, that was it!

She began to move along the hall, towards the sliver of light. There was a board somewhere that creaked: she mustn't step on it, each time before she put her weight forward she must test the darkness in front of her. Now she could see part of Mimsy's bed; now Mimsy herself — standing at the window, waiting, staring out, watching for her. Oh, carefully — carefully — as if she were a shadow! Not a tremor — not a breath! Into the sudden light, past the light, past the door. Now quicker, before something happened to stop her — quicker, quicker! — running now, rushing — through the living-room, through the kitchen, down the dimly lit stairs...

The rain was coming fast. It was beating slantwise, so that it struck her in the face, stinging her eyes, and flattening her hair back in an instant. She stopped short before it, wavering for a moment. Why was she out here? Where was she going? Then she clutched her collar up with both hands and began to run again: down a narrow alley and across another, into a street that passed beside the park.

Streams of gleaming cars, and the honking of cars; people hunched under umbrellas; shops; an illumined window holding a wax lady in a satin gown; another window full of ghostly pyramids of fruit; two policemen on horses, wearing rubber capes; the gaudy lights of a picture palace flashing against the black sky and lying, floating like multicolored jewels, in the wet pavement. And now the park gates; and the deserted paths curving under shadowy trees. The blurred shapes of benches; the bandstand; the lamp-rimmed pond. She ran swiftly, almost wildly — crying again, although scarcely conscious that she was crying; clutching her collar up, and bending before the rain...

The hallway was dim, and the door at the farther end of it closed.

She knocked against it loudly with both hands. 'Mrs. Mac — Mrs. Mac ——'

Mrs. McMasters was wearing a woolen dressing-gown and a cap like a small fish-net. She said, 'Hello,' and shut the door after them. 'What's up?'

Robin sat on a chair, shivering, crying, her clothes plastered about her.

'Oh, d-don't talk to me!' she said. 'Please d-don't — talk to me ——' She mustn't tell! No — no! She must never tell! Never!

Mrs. McMasters left the room, and returned after several minutes with a glass of hot milk. 'Here. Drink this.'

She shook her head.

'Drink it!' Mrs. McMasters insisted.

She took the glass, and held it in her lap between her hands.

Mrs. McMasters moved about, doing things with a matter-of-fact air, as if she were alone in the room; and gradually Robin stopped crying, gradually grew still again. After a while she asked:

'Can I stay here to-night, Mrs. Mac?'

'Sure.' She promptly dropped what she was doing, lumbered over to the bureau, and got a bathtowel out of one drawer and a huge flannel nightgown out of another. Then, carrying them on her arm, she came across to Robin. 'Stand up,' she ordered.

She put the glass down, and stood up.

Mrs. McMasters unfastened her jacket and pulled it off; she pulled off her dress, and her under-things, and rubbed her briskly for several moments with the towel. Then she dropped the nightgown over her head, guided her arms into the sleeves, and buttoned the collar carefully against her throat.

Robin stood silent, passive.

'Now finish your milk.'

She picked the glass up again, and held it.

Mrs. McMasters hung the wet clothes near the radiator; then went about collecting various articles — another nightgown, a hairbrush, a bag of peppermints, curlers, magazines. She said: 'You sleep here — see? You'd probably bump into the Samp woman or somebody upstairs. If you want anything, bang on the ceiling. I'll be over you.' She started towards the door; then hesitated, and turned.

There was a pause.

'The — others are all right, Robin?'

The others? 'Oh — yes. They're — everybody's — all right.'

Another pause.

She lifted her head, and met Mrs. McMasters's eyes. She asked, half-whispering: 'You won't — tell — about me? You won't tell them?'

Mrs. McMasters said: 'You dropped in for a jaw, and it was raining so hard I thought you'd better park here.'

'Yes,' Robin said. 'Yes ——'

When she was left alone, she crossed the room, stumbling a little in the folds of the huge nightgown. She sat on the edge of a chair, by the telephone. Mimsy was waiting for her; Mimsy was standing by the window, watching, waiting. She must tell Mimsy — what was it? What was it she must tell her? 'I dropped into Mrs. Mac's and it's raining so hard she thinks I'd better stay here to-night.' Yes. That was it. She picked up the receiver. 'Number —?' What was the number? She couldn't think. She put the receiver down again. There was a three in it, and a seven: three seven — seven three —— Oh, what was it? She pulled the telephone book towards her, and opened it, and turned the pages back and forth. What did she want? M — yes. Where was M? P — that was too far; H — L — here it was. Mabie — Mackaill — farther down — farther still. Mimsy. Where was Mimsy?

13

Ricky threw his coat on the bed; then slouched down by the window, and stretched his legs out in front of him. Lord, how he hated these teas! Holding a cup, nibbling a cake. The perpetual bright vivacity of the affairs — that was what scraped on his nerves. Every one making such terrific efforts to be clever: cleverness the ultimate in life; an epigram, a witty insinuation, the peak of earthly achievement. The continual rush of introductions; everything broken up, fragmentary, brittle; the sprightly voiced 'Oh, are you the Mr. Kipling who ——' He had said 'No' to that last woman. 'No, I'm not!' — and stared at her frigidly. But she had tapped his arm — these arch matrons who tapped one's arm! — and said: 'Oho! but I think you *are*, and you're simply trying to be modest!' Modest — rot! It was because he was proud, too damned proud to let her deluge him with her facile praise. She had gone swishing over to Guy Porter then. Guy Porter was in his element at these semi-social, semi-professional functions. He moved through them happily, confidently — spouting borrowed witticisms, calling every one 'darling,' protesting with immense affability, when his work was lauded, that he was the world's lousiest writer, that he had never scribbled a word except for money, and that, anyhow, he would rather be the author of one good *revue* than of the combined literary output of Galsworthy and Dreiser and poor old Shaw. He had just had a book banned; and, under a show of humorous astonishment, was extremely pleased. He had kept on saying: 'Did you know it's been banned? Yes — isn't it too deliciously comic! I've read it over three times, and I can't find a syllable! Could you find anything, darling? What do you suppose they're ——' And he had, no doubt, spent hour upon hour carefully maneuvering words, carefully contriving artful implications and innuendos, and eloquent gaps.

He, Ricky, after several minutes of the peculiarly mirthless bantering which it always seemed necessary to carry on with Helen Goss, had stalked off into a corner and found himself beside a bland, elderly, interested lady, who proved to be the hostess's maiden aunt.

She was eating sandwiches — not with the slight air of condescension which is usually assumed towards food at a tea, but largely, and with relish. She said, 'How d'you do,' and lifted her cup off the chair beside her so that he could sit down. 'Quite a big party, isn't it?' She looked him over; and, after a minute or two, became charmingly confidential. 'I'm not supposed to be here,' she confessed. 'I came in that door — behind the screen. Helen'll give me an awful bawling-out when you're all gone!'

He was delighted. 'Will she really!'

The aunt nodded. 'She gave me a nice book to read, and had my tea sent up to my room. But I brought it down again.' She indicated the plate on her lap: 'They're my sandwiches. See! They've got their crusts on.'

'Does she know you're here?'

The aunt swept a cheerful eye over the crowded room. 'No — not yet. But wait till she does!' She started on another sandwich.

'What'll happen?' he prodded.

'Oh, she'll try not to glare, and she'll say, "Hell. There's my aunt — that rummy old thing in the corner. Do be kind, somebody, and go and speak to her."'

'And then?'

'And then,' said the aunt comfortably, 'one of them'll come over, and I'll pretend I'm deaf, and they'll start shouting.' She held the plate out.

He shook his head. 'No, thanks.'

She put it down again. 'Sometimes,' she observed, 'I'm a Secret, and sometimes I'm a Joke. It depends on where I am. Who's that funny man?'

'Which one?'

She pointed him out with her sandwich.

'Oh — Dirk Callam. He's an illustrator. He did Helen's last story.'

The aunt looked him over amusedly. 'Why doesn't he pull his socks up?' she asked...

He saw Jessamine later on, in one of the smaller groups; and, after excusing himself, crossed the room to her. It was at that moment, as he joined the group, that he heard the remark. A current play was being discussed, and Jessamine was saying: 'Well, it seems to me the idea was to show a super-egoist in conflict with himself, rather than ——' The words meant nothing for an instant; then they swung back on him, rather queerly. A super-egoist in conflict with himself. What was there about the phrase? Something —— He remembered abruptly, with a slight jolt. Of course! It was his own. He had seen the play last week; and when, a few days ago, Jessamine had wanted to know what he thought of it he had said that. Well — what of it? If the words seemed to sum up her own reaction, why shouldn't she use them? He tried to dismiss the matter, to flip it casually aside. But the remark had set something going within him. He began to wonder. Had she done this before — often, perhaps? He recalled how frequently he had been impressed by the precision and smoothness with which she expressed herself. She had a small, rather fascinating trick of hesitating before she spoke, of looking off slantwise, musingly, as if she were drawing together her thoughts and testing them before permitting herself to put them into words. This had always struck him as being both charming and admirable — denoting a certain mental fastidiousness, a scrupulous regard for truth. But now, quite suddenly, it occurred to him that when she hesitated, when she looked off quietly like that, she mightn't be forming or clarifying her own opinions, but trying to remember those of somebody else. He thought: 'But, good Lord! this is idiotic. We're half the time — all of us — gabbling second-hand stuff!' But he felt irritated, and troubled. He followed Jessamine about the room, from group to group; he watched her, he listened anxiously to everything she said. Was this comment hers, or an echo; and now this one, and this? Did she really think that about Pelléas' — while she was sitting in the opera house had, within her, a feeling been bred of the music, and the feeling passed into thought, and into these words that she had just spoken? Or had she simply caught them from another person? From himself, perhaps? 'Pelléas' meant something like that to him, didn't it? Yes — substantially, yes. He kept on wanting to stop her, to demand: 'Do you mean that, Jessamine? Do you really *mean* it!' He told himself again: 'But this is idiotic! You might ask that of any of these people — of any one.' Did Guy Porter mean what he said? Did Brenda Hall — or Pete Matthews — or Mrs. Lance with her fluent self-revelations? But then these people didn't matter to him: they were on the outside, to be inspected dispassionately, to be analyzed and summed up with interest, but without consequence to himself. Jessamine was different. She had entered deeply into his imagination; she had become a part — and, for the time being, the most vital part — of his inner life. He had received from her a peace, a sort of pervading warmth of spirit, that he had never received from anybody else. He wondered now — sharply, with deliberate ruthlessness — why he had felt that peace. Why had he always come from her soothed, and warmed? He had wondered the same thing before, and had said: 'It is because of her quietness, her graciousness.' He had let it rest there; but now he forced the answer farther. Was it because she had, the whole time, studiedly avoided any friction of ideas, because she had given back to him his own thoughts — not so blatantly his own as the remark about the play, but his, fundamentally? Had he simply found in her a comforting and gratifying reënforcement of his own opinions, an insidious sop to his ego? She hadn't said 'Yes' to everything, she hadn't wearied him with colorless agreeing, with flat confirmations; she had hesitated and looked off musingly, and then spoken as if what she spoke had been brought from the very core of her being. And he had listened, and found it good; received it with pleasure, because it was his own. Was that it? All the time, from the very beginning? She had artfully — no, not artfully! no, of course not! — the whole thing had probably been automatic on her part, unconscious even. An instinct for contriving harmony, if merely a false harmony, of mood; a feeling for smoothness in relationships, for *neatness* — some people were like that:

no rough edges of argument, no jutting differences — everything fitting together — 'Yes, I think so, too; no, I don't either' — that was what it had been in spirit if not in form: everything unified, and orderly, and gracious. And he —— He had taken it for a lovely and miraculous *rapprochement*; he had lain gratefully in the shelter of his own shadow, had drawn peace from echoes...

Sitting here now, in his own room, it seemed to him that he had erected a very tall tower of assumptions on a very frail foundation. One remark — or had it, after all, been one remark? Had, without his being aware of them, small doubts been taking form within the shadowy places of his consciousness, and this one remark merely served, like a sudden flare, to illuminate their presence. Perhaps that was it. He didn't know. Only one thing he knew, was sure of. Jessamine, his concept of Jessamine, was gone now: lost irretrievably, in that first moment of doubt. She was gone just as Marcia had gone, and the one before Marcia. He might try to ignore the fact, to weave a screen of pretense about the vacancy she had left; but it wouldn't alter the truth.

He felt suddenly miserable. Why did this thing keep happening; why wasn't he satisfied to accept people for what they were? This seizing upon some one and establishing her in his mind and heart as the embodiment of everything he desired, or perfection itself — it was becoming ridiculous! Perfection: he would never find it in a person. Why couldn't he realize that? However ardently he searched, however widely, he would never find any one to match his first concept of Marcia, his concept of Jessamine that had just been lost. If he could only accept that, once and for all, he felt that he would, somehow, be *free.* He would probably marry some one then: Jessamine — Marcia — it wouldn't matter particularly which...

His thoughts began to circle outward. Perfection: what did one mean by that? What was it? A word, perhaps. But if nothing more than a word, why this perpetual straining after it, this profound restlessness before imperfection?

Wasn't his very consciousness of his lack of it the proof of its existence? But existence where? If not in people, in relationships — where was it to be found? In work, art? But if art was the product of people, of imperfection, it seemed scarcely logical to expect it to rise higher than its source. Something beyond art — something in which art was contained, perhaps, of which it was an as yet imperfectly realized phase. But what — what? God? What did God mean?

There were, from time to time, brief but vividly experienced moments when he felt, all at once, close not so much to the answer to that as to the realization of the tremendous necessity of finding out the answer. They weren't mystical, cloudy moments, among candles and bread and wine; they were quite simple and extraordinarily *clear* — as if his thoughts were moving with a new spontaneity, a new sureness; as if values were adjusting themselves; as if doubts that had seemed to be a wall of granite were discovered, suddenly, to be a wall of mist. God — the Cause, the Principle. How did one find out; how did one understand?

He felt at such times, if only for a lighted instant, as if he were standing at the start of a magnificent and inevitable quest...

He heard Poppet come in, and say hello to Boots.

'Robin back yet?'

'No — just Ricky and me.'

She walked across the hall, firmly and briskly. Poppet seemed to do everything firmly and briskly these days. She wore an air of knowing precisely what she was about, and precisely why she was about it. Occasionally there was something a little grim in her busy-ness. He thought he understood. She was working for the Playhouse; but deeper down, with a fierce and secret intensity, she was working for herself. Although she never referred to it, he supposed that her confidence, probably even her self-respect, had been profoundly jarred by her experience with Rand Tarvin.

And now she was building it up again, hour by hour, achievement by achievement; subjecting herself to a rigorous discipline, she was testing the quality of her spirit, gauging her abilities. Obviously the pointed disregard of various people was merely spurring her on, merely adding fuel to the fire of her purpose. She was proud, of course. Poppet had always moved proudly. He wondered, sometimes, just what it had cost her in humiliation to step down from Clumington's company into the obscure and embryonic Playhouse. She had done it casually enough on the surface — but underneath? It must have stung; it must have frightened her more than they had any conception of at the time. Probably she had forced herself to it only by seizing for a shield the passionate determination to lift what she had descended to up to her own level. He could remember certain things: that night, for instance — the première of the first play she had directed. They had all sat near the front, curious and anxious. The performance had run creditably enough until near the end, when some one had messed a scene up in a rather ludicrous fashion so that the audience had laughed. When they had made their way back-stage a little later, they had found Poppet white with fury: she had stood quite rigid, her hands clenched, storming at the one responsible for the blunder with a bitterness that had startled them. She had gone on for several minutes; and then stopped short and thrown herself down and cried tempestuously, tragically, shaking off their efforts to compose her. When she had gone back again the next day, it had been silently, with that grim look in her eyes. Yes, it must have stung...

The front door opened again, and Boots said:

'Hello, Robin.'

Poppet's voice called out: 'Is that Robin?'

'Yes ——'

She recrossed the hall; and Ricky got up slowly and stretched himself, and followed her into the living-room. Robin was taking her jacket off; and Boots was sprawled out on the couch, his knees drawn up, and a book propped against his knees. Poppet gave him a friendly whack, and said: 'Hey! stop reading. Listen, everybody!' They turned to her, and: 'News!' she informed them, with a flourish. It was about the Playhouse. They, the whole company, were migrating to the Cape this coming summer. A small, untenanted theater, somewhere beyond Hyannis, had been spoken of by the aunt of the stage-manager; and in one day negotiations with the owners had been practically completed. 'The crowd who were there last year,' she explained, 'made a hash of it. Must have been their own fault. The location's swell; there are hordes of idle rich to be amused; and the place is reasonably well equipped. We're going to start a publicity campaign that'll rock the countryside! Bimmie's writing the stuff now. And Pat's going to round up all the influential dowagers within fifty miles and blackmail 'em into being sponsors. And Warner's aunt ——' She went on sketching out plans for several minutes, leaning forward, and talking rapidly. 'Oh, we'll swing it!' she declared. 'We'll swing it all right! Don't you think it sounds great!'

'Rather!' Ricky and Boots agreed.

She looked expectantly at Robin; and 'Yes,' Robin said. 'Yes, it does, doesn't it?'

She began to make other plans then, to take in the rest of them: 'You can come, too, Boots! You can sell tickets, or something. And you can spend your vacation there, can't you, Ricky? And Robin can dish New York for a while, and we'll ——'

Robin said suddenly, and very clearly: 'I'm not going to New York.'

They turned; there was a slight pause; then,

'I mean, Denis and I aren't going to be married after all.'

They stared at her.

'Aren't going to be married!' Poppet repeated blankly.

She sat on the arm of a chair, and swung her leg. 'Don't look so stricken,' she said. Her voice curled up, almost lightly. 'Engagements have been broken before, you know.'

Ricky said: 'Are you joking, Robin?'

'Oh, no.' She explained quickly, but still with that hint of lightness: 'We decided yesterday. We've both been kidding ourselves along, but yesterday we talked it all over. We're fond of one another, of course — but we don't want to get married.'

They were too dumbfounded to make any comment; and even when their first astonishment had subsided, they still didn't know what to say. Robin and Denis not going to be married! How on earth ought they to receive such an announcement? Congratulations — condolences — nothing seemed to *fit* the situation.

'Then you'll be here, after all!' Poppet said. 'You won't be leaving us!'

'No, I won't be leaving.'

Boots found his tongue: 'Say! that'll be ——' But he stopped again, abruptly, and looked uncomfortable.

Ricky finished the remark: 'That will be very nice for the rest of us, Robin.'

She didn't speak for a moment. She sat motionless, her face emptied of all expression; then she said: 'Thank you' — and jumped up immediately afterwards, slinging her jacket over her shoulder. 'Where's Mimsy?' she wanted to know.

None of them were sure: shopping, probably, or at a tea.

She said: 'Well, I hope she won't be long; I'm starved' — and swung off to her room...

She heard Mimsy come in a little later. The door was opened, and closed; and somebody said something. Then there was a silence. They were telling Mimsy, talking together softly. That must be it. Well, it didn't matter; it didn't make much difference how it happened. They'd tell her, or she'd tell her: if they did — so much the better, it would save her the trouble.

While she was pulling off her dress, still creased from last night's rain, Mimsy came into the room. She shut the door after her, and stood against it, straight and rigid.

'Robin!'

'Yes?'

Her voice cut sharply through the quietness: 'Look here, Robin!'

Robin turned. 'What's the matter?'

Mimsy's eyes were riveted on her. 'They've just told me about you and Denis' — she paused; then her voice snapped out again: 'What do you mean, Robin! Why are you ——'

Robin interrupted her: 'Say!' — she sounded irritable. 'You needn't start lecturing, Mimsy! It's none of your business!' Her irritableness deepened suddenly to a sort of anger: 'I don't know what's the matter with you all! The others acted as if I'd committed a crime. It's ridiculous! If I don't want to marry him, I don't have to! I'm a free person!' Her anger went down again, although she still spoke quickly and vigorously: 'I'm sorry if I've hurt him, but it's better to break the thing off now than make a mess of it afterwards. And, anyhow, I don't think he was hurt. He didn't say much, but I shouldn't be surprised if he felt the same way. So there's no point in kicking up a fuss.' She stood silent for a moment, facing her; then, 'Anybody'd think,' she said, 'anybody'd think, from the way you're all acting, that you wanted to get rid of me!'

During dinner they talked about the Playhouse. Poppet drew a plan of the summer theater on the tablecloth; and they discussed what sort of plays it would be advisable to present there, and what the scale of prices ought to be, and the type and quantity of advertising...

Every one was immensely interested.

It was towards eight o'clock in the evening when the telephone rang.

Boots answered it, and called Robin. As she picked up the receiver, he gathered together one or two books and, with the somewhat heavily stressed tact which he was capable of exhibiting on very special occasions, marched noisily out of the room.

'Robin ——?'

She said: 'Yes, Denis.'

He was leaving for New York the next morning. Reasons were rather vague: a sudden tightening-up of plans, something to be attended to promptly. He asked: 'Are you absolutely sure, Robin, about what was decided yesterday?'

How funny if she were to tell him, in a loud voice, so that every one would hear: 'No, I didn't mean it! I was only pretending! I love you — I love you!' She said: 'Yes, Denis. I'm sorry, but I'm — quite sure.'

She wondered if he would ask for Mimsy; but he didn't. He requested: 'You'll explain to the others about my going, won't you?' — and then: 'I'll see you all soon, of course. I'll probably be running back in a few weeks, and we'll ——'

Yes. Yes, to be sure. He must come back; he must come back for Mimsy.

A little more passing of words, and then the end:

'— Au revoir, Robin.'

'Good-bye,' she said. 'Good-bye.'

Poppet came into the room; and she realized, abruptly, that she had been holding the telephone tightly in both hands for some time. She put it down again.

Poppet was refilling her fountain-pen at the desk. After a moment or two she asked, looking up over the ink-bottle:

'What are you going to do now, Robin?'

'Do —?'

'Yes. When you're through with the Tavern, I mean.'

She sat motionless, her hands lying loosely in her lap. 'I don't know,' she said. What was she going to do? She had never thought of that. How funny! What was going to become of her?

'Oh, well, you'll find something, of course.'

'Yes,' she said. 'Of course. I'll find something ——'

It was a quarter of an hour or so later that the telephone rang again.

Mimsy answered it. Robin heard her speaking in a smooth voice. 'Yes,' and then, 'Very well' — that was all.

A few minutes later she passed through the living-room with her hat and coat on. She said: 'I don't think we have enough bread for breakfast,' and went out.

Robin wound up the phonograph; she moved the lever to 'Loud' and opened both the little doors wide. She put on the first record her hand touched, and stood stiffly in the harsh blare of music.

'Do you wonder who we are?
We are Gentlemen of Japan ——'

'Hey!' Boots remonstrated; but she didn't take any notice. Voices hurling themselves against her; voices roaring in her ears. Oh, louder — louder! Fill her with noise! Beat out all her thoughts! Don't let her think of them!

Breakfast was apparently just over. People were trooping upstairs; food smells were still hanging in the hall; and through the dining-room door came the sound of dishes being stacked on trays, and of Mrs. Bird's hoarse, lusty voice singing something about Burlington Bertie from Bow...

Mrs. McMasters was at the telephone in her room; so Robin seated herself on a chair-arm and waited, her hands thrust into her pockets.

'Rubbish!' Mrs. McMasters was booming. 'Don't you think I can tell an underweight fowl when I see one! I'm not daffy, Mr. Holmes. What? What? Speak up, please — don't mumble. Oh, you do, do you? That's very interesting. But just the same, Mr. Holmes, you can make it up — and this morning, before eleven — or I'll switch my orders over to Green's. Yes — Green's. I don't care; it doesn't make any difference to me.' She plumped the receiver on to the hook, and turned round. 'Oh — hello.'

Robin stood up. 'I've come to ask you about something, Mrs. Mac.' She spoke evenly and crisply. 'Would you like me to do the house over for you, the way I suggested the other day?'

'Jerk it up ——' Mrs. McMasters remembered.

'Yes. I'm not going to get married after all, and I'll be through with the Tavern in a couple of months or so. So if you'd like me to, I will.'

Mrs. McMaster's pale, shrewd eyes were fastened on her face. 'You're not going to get married!'

'No.' There was a pause; then: 'That's why I came here the other night. I'd just told him I didn't want to, and I was scared I'd hurt him. But it's all right now. We both feel the same way about it.' She thought: 'It isn't fooling her. She knows I'm making it up. She knows it quite well.'

There was another pause. Mrs. McMasters was the first to speak:

'You can start in a couple of months, you say?'

'Yes.'

'Very well. What d'you want for a salary?'

A salary? 'Oh — I don't know. It doesn't matter.'

'Bosh. It always matters. Shall I pay you by the week, or a lump sum for the whole job?'

'By the week, I guess.'

'All right. It doesn't make any difference to me ——'

A girl in a blue cotton dress came to the door and reported that there was some one at the front making inquiries about a room. Mrs. McMasters said, 'I won't be long, if you want to wait,' and lumbered ponderously after the girl.

Robin sat down. So — that was done. When she was through with the Tavern, she would come here; when they asked her, 'But what is going to happen to you, Robin?' she would say, 'I am going to do over Mrs. Mac's place for her.' Yes. It would be something to say to them. And until then, for these next two months ——

She began, with a curious sense of detachment, to go over the several facets of the situation. Denis would come back for Mimsy in a little while; and that would be settled. And the apartment? The lease was up soon, wasn't it? — in another ten weeks or so. They could re-sign it; or they could move. Which? Probably they had better move. Mimsy's room wouldn't be needed then. And it would make a lot of work — it would be good to make a lot of work. Rushing around; sorting things; packing things. And Poppet and Boots would be away all summer. That would leave only two of them: only her and Ricky. It might, under the circumstances, be best to wait until fall before they got another place. Perhaps by then everything would be clear; perhaps by then she would know what was going to happen to her. If they waited until fall, she and Ricky could put up somewhere — at a hotel, say — or here, even. Yes, why couldn't they stay here, at Mrs. Mac's, and when Poppet and Boots came back again choose a new apartment together? She wondered if Ricky would mind living here. He was so fastidious about people, about things around him. Probably he would. Well — where else? Her thoughts turned to Henry. Ricky might go and stay with Henry. That would be all right, wouldn't it? He liked it down there on the wharf; and Henry wouldn't mind; he would be pleased. Of course. She would call Henry up and ask him. And then she could come over here by herself. She ought to be here, anyhow: she would be able to get more done — to look after things, maybe, while Mrs. Mac had some sort of vacation. Yes. That was it. They would pack all their stuff up, and store it somewhere until fall. Here, perhaps. They might store it here. In the basement ——

She sat motionless for several minutes; then, abruptly, she got up.

The girl in the blue dress was mopping the hall floor; and she told her, 'When Mrs. Mac's through, say I'm in the basement, will you?' — and went outside — down to the pavement, and then, turning, down the second flight of steps.

She closed the door after her.

The little square hall was dark, but there was a steep slant of sunshine in the front room. Window-screens were stacked blackly against the plaster walls, and red-striped awnings that would be put up later on. It was very still. She walked about slowly, from room to room. The pipes in the bathroom were yellow — she had forgotten that. The piece of board Ricky had nailed on to the kitchen window-sill was there yet. They had kept their milk on it, hadn't they? And this was where they had stood the soap-dish with the pansies around it; and these the hooks the Coronation mugs had swung from. Even the hooks were colored. Funny, how they had left their mark on everything. Other people had passed through here since, but nothing of them seemed to linger. Only a few nails, perhaps, or another shelf. But there were signs of the Kiplings everywhere — everywhere one looked. She went back to the front room. Under dust and grime the window woodwork was still green, and the baseboard about the floor still orange. On the outer side of the door was the sunset Boots had painted: a faded sunset, with a pear-shaped sun and a small dot that was a bird. And this was where they had hung the Swag; and the grocery-box bookcase had stood there, in that corner, with a candle on it — a blue candle — a yellow candle — which had it been? Queer, how she could feel it all about her. Another world, another life.

She stood quite still.

How quiet it was down here! She had forgotten...

A door opened; and Mrs. McMasters bulged into the room.

'Hello.' She looked around. 'Seems sort of familiar, doesn't it?'

Robin didn't answer for a moment; then she said: 'We're all scattering for a while. The others are going to different places, and I'm coming back here.'

'Not down here?'

'Yes.'

'Rubbish!' Mrs. McMasters said briskly. 'You can stay upstairs. There's plenty of room.'

'No.' She shook her head. 'I would rather come here.

'You mean — just for a time, of course? While you're working on the house?'

'Yes ——'

They were both silent; then Mrs. McMasters observed slowly, deliberately:

'Well, I guess you never thought you'd ever land in the basement again, did you!'

'No,' Robin said. 'It's rather — funny, isn't it?'

14

It was all quite ready. She had walked through each room twice to make sure; she had gone over the table carefully, item by item. Flowers, and candles, and a box of matches with which to light the candles; butter, pepper and salt, cheese, sugar, cream, rolls, and apricot jam; glasses, and cups and saucers; napkins, plates, silver, and a mat for the teapot, and another mat for the casserole. Cakes and fruit on the desk; and in the kitchen in the ice-chest bottles of ginger-ale and salad and sliced chicken, and the casserole in the oven, and the kettle full of water on a gas-ring. The chairs had been drawn up to the table, and places mentally assigned: herself at the head, because she was hostess, and Mrs. Mac at the end, and Ricky and Mimsy and Boots on one side, and Henry and Poppet and Denis on the other.

And she, too, was ready. She had put on the red-and-gold dress that had been worn only once or twice because Denis hadn't liked it, and high-heeled slippers with flashing buckles, and the bright jangly necklace that one of the waitresses at the Tavern had presented to her last Wednesday when she left. She had brushed her hair until it had made a small sizzling sound, and rubbed some of Poppet's lip rouge on her mouth. She was ready now — quite ready. Everything was. They would be astonished when they saw what she had accomplished. She had worked all through yesterday, continuously, from the time the furniture had arrived until two o'clock this morning; and then she had started in again before seven and gone on, without a break, until this moment. Mrs. Bird had tramped down at noon with a trayful of hot food; but she had touched nothing except the roll, which could be eaten while she rushed around. And Mimsy had called up from Marcia's to say that she was coming over to help; but she had told her not to, had refused her offer quickly and vigorously: 'I'm getting on fine; I don't need any help——' She hadn't wanted Mimsy to come here, to be caught alone with Mimsy...

They hadn't been alone together now since the evening, just after Mimsy's return from her New York trip with Marcia, when she, Robin, had received that carefully formed announcement and cried out, with appropriate astonishment: 'Really, Mimsy! *Really!*' Mimsy had sat very still while she was speaking, her fingers interlaced. 'We saw a lot of one another while I was there, and we realized quite suddenly — at the end —— It's — it's all rather silly, of course ——' She had said: 'But I think it's perfectly swell, Mimsy! I can't get over it! I'm *flabbergasted!*' She had rushed out and told the others, because it had seemed to her that Mimsy would be grateful to be spared the necessity of doing that. 'Hey! all of you! What on earth do you suppose!' They had been incredulous for a moment; then blank with astonishment. 'Mimsy and Denis!' She had explained just as Mimsy had explained: 'They saw a lot of one another while she was there, you know, and they realized it all at once, and in a little while he's going to come over here ——' She had been gay and excited: 'Isn't it a blessing we took turns in falling for him! Suppose we'd both done it at once! Wouldn't it have been harrowing! One of us would have had to leap into the river!' She had suggested: 'Let's send him a telegram welcoming him back to the family' — and had snatched up the telephone and called Western Union. That had been the last time she had been alone with Mimsy. She had helped her pack, and helped her make plans; but always, after that, the others had been there, too. They had been there when Mimsy had said: 'I hope we'll be able to get a fairly quiet place, because Denis is going to do some writing next winter. He has a book sketched out, a novel ——' Denis's book! She had said: 'Has he, really?' She had been grateful that the others were there, grateful to be able to take shelter behind the others...

She looked up now at the clock. Ten past six. It seemed later than that. The rain, that had started early in the afternoon, was drawing darkness down quickly: the little hall was solid shadow, and even here in the front room everything was becoming cloudy and shapeless. But she wouldn't light the candles just yet. It would be another twenty minutes, half an hour, perhaps, before they got here. The train arrived at six-seven; and then Ricky had to call at the Playhouse for Poppet and at the Socialist Club for Boots. She had asked them to run up and get Mrs. Mac when they reached the house; so they would all come in together — all of them.

She sat down. There was nothing else to do. She felt queer. It was the first time for over two months that she had sat down with nothing to do. She thought: 'Well, never mind. It's all right ——' To-morrow she would start in again. All the rooms would have to be gone over carefully: colors decided upon; wall-papers selected; paints bought; draperies bought; a lot of old furniture got rid of, and a general rearrangement of the rest. And after that ——

She sat quite still. She felt a sudden strange coldness fall across her. Yes — after that? What was she going to do after that, after she was finished with Mrs. McMasters's? There was this brief stretch of activity; and then — what? Darkness, emptiness. How queer! It had never seemed like that before. There had been other times, plenty of them, when she hadn't known what was going to happen next, when she hadn't had even the small temporary assurance which she possessed now. But other times it had been different: there had been a great, unmapped space in front of her, but it had been radiant, not black, with uncertainty — a space before which she had stood eager, expectant, confident, waiting for something — anything — to flash out towards her. There had been a lilt of excitement to those periods: perhaps this moment it would come — or this — or this — looking up, reaching out — that was how it had been. But now —— Darkness, and emptiness: nothing else before her. What would happen; what would she do? She, Robin Kipling, who had gone running out to perform such fine, dashing deeds! Adventures — crusades — riding on a horse between cheering crowds! She was back here again, in the basement; she was back where she had started. The others had marched on, ahead: Poppet straight towards a definite goal, and Ricky with his poems, and Boots with his purposes, and Mimsy with Denis — they had all gone on, and she was left behind. There was nothing more to return to, and nothing in front of her; and, worst of all, strangely, frighteningly, for the first time in her life, she felt without *interest* — nothing mattered — she didn't care. If some one were to have said: 'By going through that door you may become a great actress, or a great artist, or a great singer' — it would have seemed scarcely worth her while to cross the room; even if she might have had Denis back, wholly and forever, simply by touching a corner of the desk — would she have leaned forward, have reached out her hand?

She felt, suddenly, a wave of cold terror wash over her. What had happened? What did this mean? It was as though she were through with life; as though she were *dead*.

She sat stiff and straight, the darkness closing about her.

They would be here soon; in a few minutes the door would open, and they would all come in. They would look at her: they would search her with their eyes. Yes! All their eyes — searching her, boring down into her through flimsy pretenses of gayety or nonchalance. They would be alert to-night. Because they had found her there the other day —— Oh, why had she stumbled like that! Just once in all this time, just for ten minutes. It had been stupid, *stupid!* A letter — what was a letter! 'Miss Margaret Kipling' — familiar writing, backward-slanted with dashes over the *i*'s instead of dots. She had picked it up, and held it in her hands for a moment; and then she had cried, and they had come in and found her. She had flung out some sort of excuse; but they had wondered. Yes — she knew that. Poppet had asked, a little later: 'You are quite sure, Robin, that you won't mind staying alone?' And Mrs. Mac, too. When she had told her about Mimsy and Denis, she had said: 'Oh! Really!' — in a curious voice. They were all wondering: they would all be studying her to-night. Ricky and Mimsy, Poppet and Boots; Henry, who watched things; Denis, who in retrospect must have learned to question the convenient abruptness of his release; and Mrs. Mac — Mrs. Mac, who had never accepted Mimsy as she accepted the rest of them, who might, if the situation were suddenly made clear to her, throw out in an unreasoning spurt of anger something that would shatter completely all that she had built up...

The bells of the corner church jangled out. Half-past six.

They were on their way: they were coming nearer — nearer. Any moment now ——

She gripped her hands together. She said aloud: 'But I can't! *I can't!*' Not this time! Oh, not this time! She couldn't twist her mouth into any more smiles, she couldn't make her voice laugh: she couldn't fool them — she couldn't do it to-night! Their eyes would be like swords; she would cry out before their eyes! She couldn't do it! She must go away! Yes — yes! That was it. She would go away. She would light all the candles, and go away, and let them think what they pleased! Let them be upset! Let Mimsy and Denis fumble their way to the truth; and Mrs. Mac sit there, knowing that, after all, in spite of what she had boasted, in spite of everything she had sworn, she, Robin Kipling, had been beaten!

Beaten — yes! And afraid: running away — a coward! Not only beaten, but a coward into the bargain! That was what she was. All these years fine words and big dreams — and this for the end.

She stood up in the darkness. Her arm knocked against the desk, and something fell on to the floor. She stooped, automatically, and found it. The Duke's medal. She had meant to hang it somewhere. Over the bookshelves. She had forgotten. She held it in her hand, standing motionless. 'For gallantry in service.' That was what the letter had said, wasn't it? Queer — old words darting out of a mist.

Gallantry —— What had he done? Gone forward —— She used to be able to see him going forward: guns, and airplanes, and flags waving, and the Duke with his head high. An old picture. Silly, of course. There wouldn't be flags.

Gallantry —— Why had she thought of that? A word. But the Duke hadn't got a medal for a word...

She thought, all at once, with a rush of passionate feeling: '*But it was easy for him! It was easy!*' She, too, could have won a medal! She could have done that — whatever he had done! She could have been gallant! Like Joan of Arc — like all the rest of that crowd! It had been easy for them! There had been something big, and they had thrown themselves into it. They had only had to fight and be killed; they hadn't had to laugh in the face of emptiness!

She felt herself trembling a little, and growing hot.

Something big before them ——

Something big: an adventure. That was what they had had; and she — now, at this moment, she had something, too. Only different: not like theirs, not like the Duke's...

She thought suddenly, vividly: 'Perhaps this is my adventure!' Yes! This thing before her!

How extraordinary! She had always expected it to be like theirs: on the outside, with drums and banners — something splendid and spectacular — flashing against the sky, flaming across the years. That was what she had expected, wasn't it? Not this. She had been going to run away from this!

Her fingers had closed over the medal; they were clutching it tightly, tightly. She thought: 'But can I do it? Can I do it?' They were all coming down here; they were all going to watch her. Everything she did, everything she said, they would be watching — understanding. She couldn't fool them with pretense. That was it! That was what she must realize! She couldn't pretend to them to-night! When she laughed, there must be laughter all through her; when she looked at Denis as if she didn't care, she mustn't care. Yes — yes! That was it! Not do it just for them, but for herself — for something larger than herself. To prove some truth that underlay her being: to prove that she, Robin Kipling, the core of her, the vital part of her, was beyond these things that had happened; that though she had lost Denis, though nothing was behind her and nothing in front of her, though all about her lay shadows and mystery, she was without fear, inviolable, *whole*...

A car had stopped outside. Through the sound of falling rain came the sound of voices. She turned quickly; she felt for the box of matches and struck one, and lit the candles on the table. Now they were coming down the steps; now they were in the hall.

She stood ready, facing the door.

THE END

BOSTON PUBLIC LIBRARY
3 9999 10030 213 0

DORIS PEEL

was born in England and lived in Canada before her family moved to Brookline, Massachusetts. At four she was picking raspberries in her grandmother's garden in Surrey, at six she took a prize for a condensed version of 'Pilgrim's Progress.' Two years later she was penciling out short stories and reading them aloud to her friends.

Then came school essays and themes, followed by two years in an art studio down South—business college, walking trips, then writing in earnest. 'Children of the Wind,' a first novel which any established author might envy, was finished before she was twenty.

'I am frightfully keen over Tolstoi, Proust, Jane Austen, and Katharine Mansfield,' says Miss Peel. 'I like dressing in black and almost collapse with discomfort when I have to wear low heels. I adore writing about children but am petrified when left alone for ten minutes with anyone under fourteen.'

ECRET

Onions

FIVE ON PARADE

By Doris Peel

BID HER AWAKE

By Mary Grigs

DIXON'S CUBS

By John C. Moore

LIVING–

ackail

THE MIDDLE WATCH

By Ian Hay and Stephen King-Hall

A MODERN GALAXY

Assembled by Dale Warren

THARLANE

By Dorothy Cottrell

DAYS OF HER LIFE

By Wallace Irwin

HOUGHTON MIFFLIN COMPANY